The Paris Review

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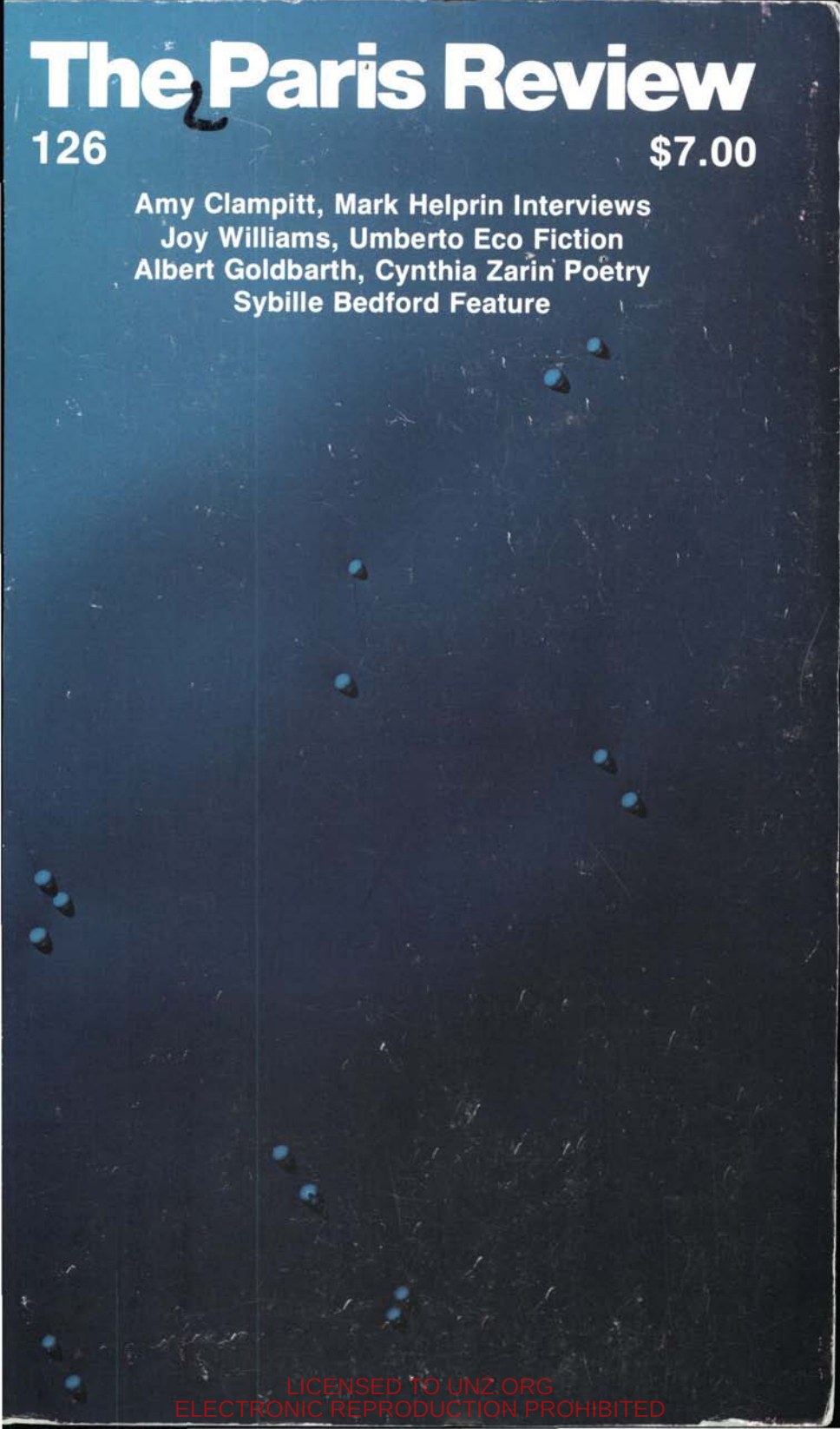

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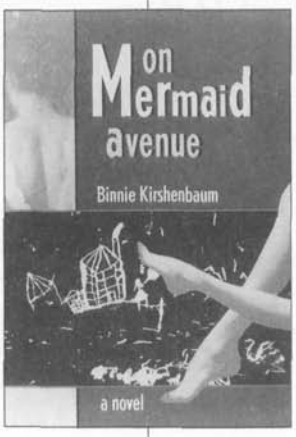

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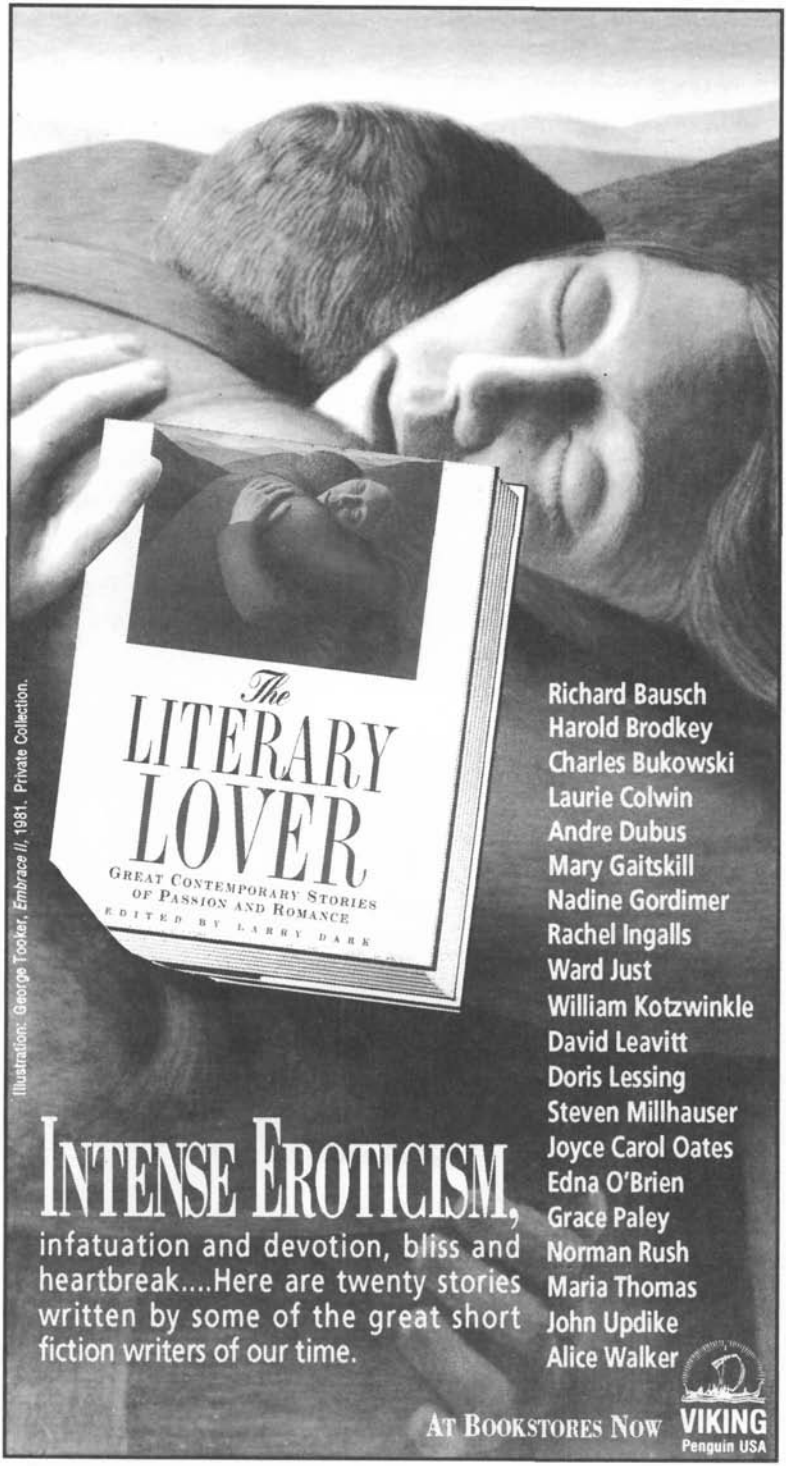

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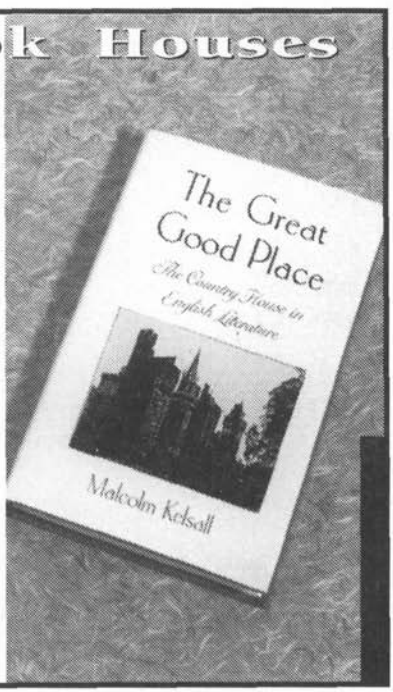

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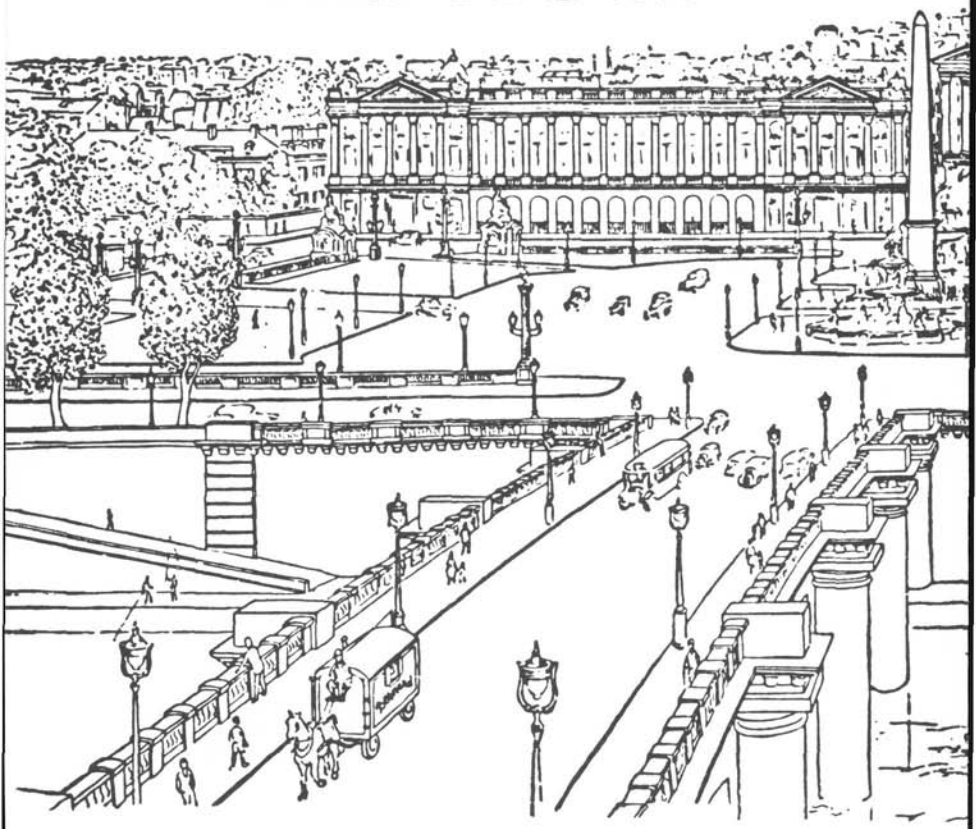

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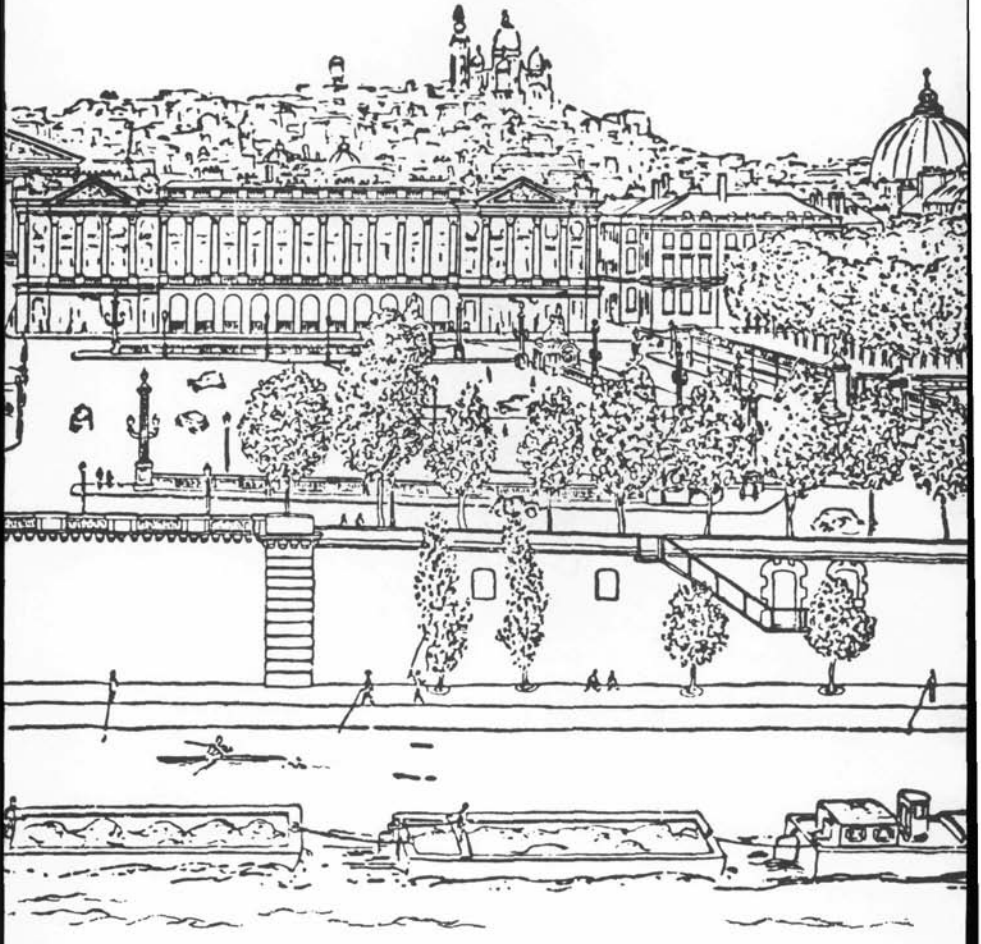

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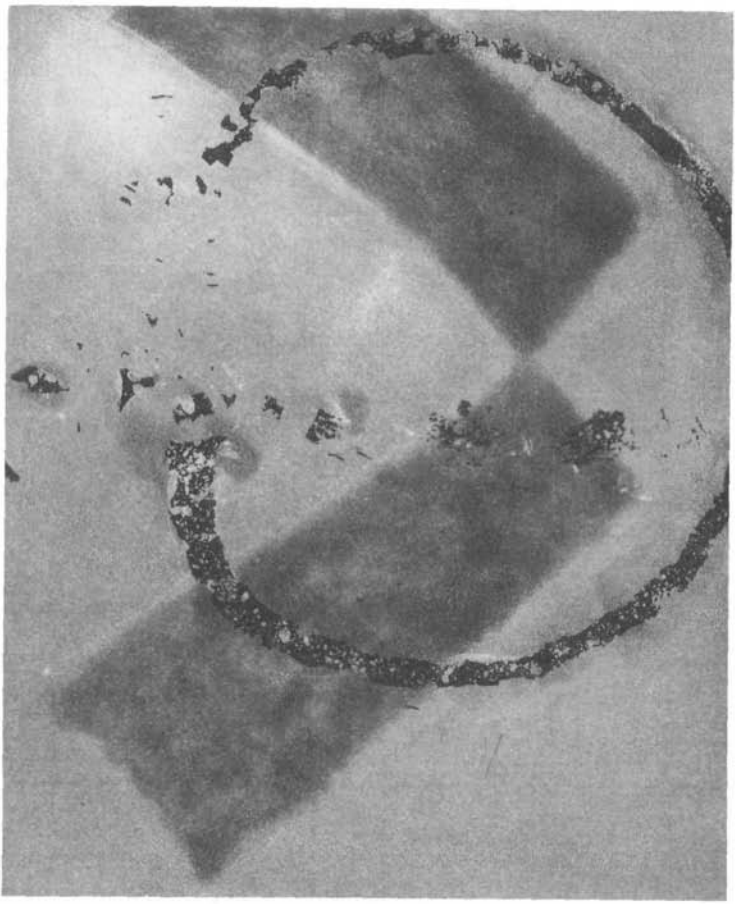

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Her Real Name

Charles D'Ambrosio

for P.L.A.

I

The girl's scalp looked as though it had been singed by fire—strands of thatchy red hair snaked away from her face, then settled against her skin, pasted there by sweat and sunscreen and the blown grit and dust of travel. For a while her thin hair had remained as light and clean as the down of a newborn chick, but it was getting hotter as they drove west, heading into a summer-long drought that scorched the landscape, that withered the grass and melted the black tar between expansion joints in the road and bloated like balloons the bodies of raccoon and deer and dog and made everything on the highway ahead ripple like a mirage through waves of rising heat. Since leaving Fargo, it had been too hot to wear the wig, and it now lay on the seat between them, still holding within its webbing the shape of her head. Next to it, a bag of orange candy—*smiles*, she called them—spilled across the vinyl. Sugar crystals ran into the dirty stitching and stuck to her thigh. Gum wrap-

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pers and greasy white bags littered the floor, and on the dash, amid a flotsam of plastic cups, pennies and matchbooks, a bumper sticker curled in the heat. EXPECT A MIRACLE, it read.

The girl cradled a black Bible in her lap, the leather covers as worn and ragged as old tennis shoes. The inner leaf contained a family tree dating back to 1827, names tightly scrawled in black against yellowing parchment, a genealogy as ponderous as those kept in Genesis, the book of the generations of Adam. The list of ancestors on the inner leaf was meaningless ancient history to the man, whose name was Jones, but the girl said her family had carried that same Bible with them wherever they went, for one hundred and fifty years, and that she wanted it with her too. "That's me," the girl had said, showing Jones her name, the newest of all, penned in generous loops of Bic blue. She'd written it in herself along the margin of the page. *b. 1960–*. The girl read different passages aloud as they drove, invoking a mix of epic beauty and bad memories, of Exodus and the leather belt her stepfather used to beat her when she broke a commandment—one of the original ten or one of his additions. Jones wasn't sure what faith she placed in the austere Christianity of her forefathers, but reading aloud seemed to cast a spell over her. She had a beautiful church-trained voice that lifted each verse into a soothing melody, a song whose tune of succor rose and fell somewhere beyond the harsh demands of faith. Only minutes before she'd read herself to sleep with a passage from Jeremiah.

Now, as if she felt Jones staring, the girl stirred.

"You were looking at me," she said. "You were thinking something."

Her face was shapeless, soft and pale as warm putty.

"I could feel it," she said. "Where are we?"

They hadn't gone more than a mile since she'd dozed off. She reached for the candy on the seat.

"You hungry? You want a smile Jones?"

"No, none for me," Jones said.

"A Life Saver?" She held the unraveled package out.

"Nothing, thanks."

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"Me eating candy, and my teeth falling out." The girl licked the sugar off a smile and asked, "How far to Las Vegas?"

Jones jammed a tape in the eight-track. He was driving a 1967 Belvedere he'd bought for seven hundred dollars cash in Newport News, and it had come with a bulky eight-track, like an atavistic organ, bolted beneath the glove box. He'd found two tapes in the trunk, and now, after fifteen thousand miles, he was fairly sick of both Tom Jones and Steppenwolf. But he preferred the low-fidelity noise of either tape to the sound of himself lying.

"Why don't you come with me little girl," he sang along, in a high, mocking falsetto, "on a magic-carpet ride."

"How far?" the girl asked.

Jones adjusted his grip on the steering wheel. "Another day, maybe."

She seemed to fall asleep again, her dry-lidded eyes shut like a lizard's, her parched, flaking lips parted, her frail body given over to the car's gentle rocking. Jones turned his attention back to the road, a hypnotic black line snaking through waves of yellow grass. It seemed to Jones that they'd been traveling through eastern Montana forever, that the same two or three trees, the same two or three farmhouses and grain silos were rushing past like scenery in an old movie, only suggesting movement. Endless fields, afire in the bright sun, were occasionally broken by stands of dark cottonwood or the gutted chassis of a rusting car. Collapsing barns leaned over in the grass, giving in to the hot wind and the insistent flatness, as if passively accepting the laws of a world whose only landmark, as far as Jones could see, was the level horizon.

"He's out there," the girl said. "I can feel him out there when I close my eyes. He knows where we are."

"I doubt that very much," Jones said.

The girl struggled to turn, gripping the headrest. She looked through the rear window at the warp of the road as it narrowed to a pinprick on the pale edge of the world they'd left behind: it was out of the vanishing point that her father would come.

"I expect he'll be caught up soon," she said. "He's got a sense. One time he predicted an earthquake."

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"It's a big country," Jones said. "We could've gone a million other ways. Maybe if you think real hard about Florida that'll foul up his super-duper predicting equipment."

"Prayer," the girl said. "He prays. Nothing fancy. We're like Jonah sneaking on that boat in Tarshish; they found him out."

The girl closed her eyes; she splashed water on her face and chest.

"It's so hot," she said. "Tell me some more about the Eskimos."

"I'm running out of things to say about Eskimos," Jones said. "I only read that one book."

"Say old stuff, I don't care."

He searched his memory for what he remembered of Knud Rasmussen.

"Nothing's wasted," Jones said. "They use everything. The Inuit can make a sled out of a slain dog. They kill the dog and skin it, then cut the hide into two strips."

"I'm burning alive," the girl said.

"They roll up the hide and freeze the strips in water to make the runners. Then they join the runners together with the dog's rib bones." Jones nibbled the corner of an orange smile. "One minute the dog's pulling the sled, the next minute he is the sled." He saw that the girl was asleep. "That's irony," he said and then repeated the word. "Irony." It sounded weak, inadequate; it described nothing; he drove silently on. Out through the windshield he saw a landscape too wide for the eye to measure—the crushing breadth of the burnt fields and the thin black thread of road vanishing into a vast blue sky as if the clouds massed on the horizon were distant cities, and they were going to them.

She'd been working the pumps and the register at a crossroads station in southern Illinois, a rail-thin girl with stiff red hair the color of rust, worried, chipped nails and green eyes without luster. She wore gray coveralls that ballooned over her body like a clown's outfit, the long legs and sleeves rolled into thick cuffs. "I've never seen the ocean," she'd said, pointing to the remains of a peeling bumper sticker on Jones's car. . . .

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BE SAILING, it read. She stood on the pump island while Jones filled his tank. The hooded blue lights above them pulsed in sync to the hovering sound of cicadas, and both were a comforting close presence in the black land spreading out around the station. Jones wanted to tell the girl to look around her, right now: this flat patch of nothing was as good as an ocean. Instead, making conversation, Jones said, "I just got out of the navy."

"You from around here?" she asked.

"Nope," Jones said.

He topped off his tank and reached into the car where he kept his money clipped to the sun visor.

"I knew that," she said. "I seen your plates."

Jones handed her a twenty from his roll of muster pay. The money represented for him his final six months in the navy, half a year in which he hadn't once set foot on land. Tired of the sea, knowing he'd never make a career out of it, on his last tour Jones had refused the temptations of shore leave, hoping to hit land with enough of a stake to last him a year. Now, as he looked at the dwindling roll, he was torn between exhaustion and a renewed desire to move on before he went broke.

"Where in Virginia you from?"

"I'm not," Jones said. "I bought the car in Newport News. Those are just old plates."

"That's too bad," the girl said. "I like the name. Virginia. Don't you?"

"I guess it's not special to me one way or the other," Jones said.

The girl folded the twenty in half and ran her thin fingers back and forth over the crease. That she worked in a gas station in the middle of nowhere struck Jones as sexy, and now he looked at her closely, trying to decide whether or not he wanted to stop a night or two in Carbondale. Except for the strange texture and tint of her red hair, he thought she looked good, and the huge coveralls, rippling in the breeze, made her seem sweet and lost, somehow innocent and alone in a way that gave Jones the sudden confidence that he could pick her up without much trouble.

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"You gonna break that?" Jones asked, nodding at the bill.

Her arm vanished entirely as she reached into the deep pocket of her coveralls and pulled out a roll of bills stained black with grease and oil. Jones took the change, then looked off, around the station. In the east a dome of light rose above Carbondale, a pale yellow pressing out against the night sky. The road running in front of the station was empty except for a spotlight that shone on a green dinosaur and a Sinclair sign that spun on a pole above it.

"Don't get scared, working out here?" he asked.

"Nah," she said. "Hardly anyone comes out this way, 'less they're like you, 'less they're going somewhere. Had a man from Vernal gas here the other night. That's in Utah."

"Still—"

"Some nights I wouldn't care if I got robbed."

Jones took his toilet kit—a plastic sack that contained a thin, curved bone-like bar of soap, a dull razor and a balding toothbrush—out of the glove box. "You mind if I wash up?"

"Washroom's around back," she said. "By the propane tanks."

In the bathroom, he took off his T-shirt and washed himself with a wetted towel, watching his reflection in the mirror above the sink as though it were someone else, someone from his past. Gray eyes, a sharp sculpted jaw, ears that jutted absurdly from his close-cropped head: a navy face. Six months of shipboard isolation had left him with little sense of himself outside of his duties as an officer. In that time, held in the chrysalis of his berth, he'd forgotten not only what he looked like, but what other people might see when they looked at him. Now he was a civilian. He decided to shave, lathering up with the bar of soap. The mustache came off in four or five painful strokes.

For a moment the warm breeze was bracing against his cleanly shaven face. He stood in the lot, a little stiff, at attention, and when the girl waved to him from the cashier's widow, Jones saluted.

"See you later," he said.

"Okay," she said.

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Jones drove away, stopping at a convenience store about a mile down the road. He grabbed two six-packs, a cheap Styrofoam cooler and a bag of ice and wandered down the aisle where the toys were kept. He selected a pink gun that fired rubber suction darts. He returned to the station and parked his car in the shadow of the dinosaur. He waited. The girl sat in the glass booth behind a rack of road atlases, suddenly the sweetheart of every town he'd traveled through in the last few months. To be with someone who knew his name, to hear another voice would be enough for tonight. Jones twisted open a beer and loaded the dart gun. He licked the suction tip, took aim and fired.

"Hey," the girl shouted.

"Wanna go somewhere?" Jones asked.

They'd crossed the Mississippi three weeks ago and driven north through Iowa, staying in motels and eating in diners, enjoying high times until his money began to run out. Then they started sleeping in the car, parked at rest stops or in empty lots, arms and legs braided together in the backseat of the Belvedere. One morning Jones had gone to a bakeshop and bought a loaf of day-old sourdough bread for thirty-five cents. It was the cool blue hour before dawn, but already, as he crossed the parking lot, the sky was growing pale, and the patches of tar were softening beneath his shoes, and in the sultry air the last weak light of the streetlamps threw off dull coronas of yellow and pink. Only one other car was parked in the empty lot, and its windows had been smashed out, a spray of glass scattered like seeds across the asphalt. As Jones approached the Belvedere, he saw the girl slowly lift the hair away from her head. It was as if he were witness to some miracle of revelation set in reverse, as if the rising sun and the new day had not bestowed but instead stripped the world of vision, exposed and left it bare. Her skull was blue, a hidden thing not meant for the light. Jones opened her door. She held the wig of curly red hair in her lap.

"Damn," he said. He paced off a small circle in the parking lot.

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The girl combed her fingers calmly through the hair on her lap. She'd understood when she removed the wig that revealing herself to Jones would tip fate irrevocably. She felt that in this moment she would know Jones and know him forever. She waited for Jones to spend his shock and anger, afraid that when he cooled down she might be on her way back to Carbondale, to the gas station and her stepfather and the church and the prayers for miraculous intercession. When Jones asked what was wrong with her, and she told him, he punted the loaf of sourdough across the empty lot.

"Why haven't you said anything?"

"What was I supposed to say, Jones?"

"The truth might've made a good start."

"Seems to me you've been having yourself a fine time without it," she said. "Hasn't been all that crucial so far."

"Jesus Christ."

"Besides, I wouldn't be here now if I'd told you. You'd have been long gone."

Jones denied it. "You don't know me from Adam," he said.

"Maybe not," she said. She set the wig on her head. "I'll keep it on if you think I'm ugly." The girl swung her legs out of the car and walked across the lot. She picked up the bread and brought it back. "These things drag out," she said.

She brushed pebbles and dirt and splinters of grass from the crust and then cracked the loaf in half.

"You didn't get any orange juice, did you?" she asked. "This old bread needs orange juice."

She reached inside and tore a hunk of clean white bread from the core and passed the loaf to Jones. He ate a piece and calmed down.

"Who knows how long I've got?" she said.

When they headed out again that morning, going west seemed inevitable—driving into the sun was too much to bear, and having it at their backs in the quiet and vacant dawn gave them the feeling, however brief, that they could outrace it. It was 1977, it was August, it was the season when the rolling fields were feverish with sunflowers turning on withered stalks to reach the light, facing them in the east as they drove off at

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dawn, gazing after them in the west as the sun set, and they searched the highway ahead for the softly glowing neon strip, for the revolving signs and lighted windows and the melancholy trickle of small-town traffic that would bloom brightly on the horizon and mean food and a place to stop for the night. If Jones wasn't too tired, he pushed on, preferring the solitude of night driving, when actual distances collapsed unseen, and the car seemed to float unmoored through limitless space, the reassuring hum of tires rolling beneath him, the lights of towns hovering across the darkened land like constellations in a warm universe. By day, he stopped only when the girl wanted to see a natural wonder, a landmark, a point of historical interest. Early this morning they'd visited the valley of The Little Bighorn. Silence held sway over the sight, a silence that touched the history of a century ago and then reached beyond it, running back to the burnt ridges and bluffs and to a time when the flat golden plain in the West had not yet felt the weight of footprints. Jones watched the girl search among the huddled white markers, looking for the blackened stone where Custer fell. She'd climbed over the wrought-iron fence to stand beside the stone, and a bull snake cooling in the shadow slithered off through the yellow grass. She seemed okay, not really sick, only a little odd and alien when she took off the wig. Now and then Jones would look at the girl and think, *you're dying,* but the unvarying heat hammered the days into a dull sameness, and driving induced a kind of amnesia, and for the most part Jones had shoved the idea out of his mind until this morning when they'd discussed their next move.

"We could drive to Nevada," she'd said. "Seems we're headed that direction, anyhow."

"Maybe," Jones had said.

"It only takes an hour to get married," the girl said, "and they rent you the works. A veil, flowers. We'll gamble. I've never done that. Have you? Roulette—what do you think, Jones?"

"I said maybe."

"Jones," she said. "I'm not into maybe."

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"I don't know," Jones said. "I haven't thought it out."

"What's to think?" the girl said. "You'd be a widower in no time."

Jones squeezed the girl's knee, knobby and hard like a foal's. "Jesus," he said.

"It's not a big commitment I'm asking for."

"Okay, all right," Jones had said. "Don't get morbid."

Night fell, and the highway rose into the mountains. With the continental divide coming up, Jones couldn't decide whether or not to wake the girl. She didn't like to miss a landmark or border or any attraction advertised on a billboard. They'd stopped for the Parade of Presidents, AMERICA'S HERITAGE IN WAX, and to see alligators and prairie dogs and an ostrich and the bleached white bones of dinosaurs, and by now the back of the car was covered with bumper stickers and decals, and the trunk was full of souvenirs she'd bought, snow-filled baubles, bolo ties, beaded Indian belts, engraved bracelets, pennants. Wall Drug, Mt. Rushmore, The Little Bighorn and a bare rutted patch of dirt in the sweet grass that, according to a bullet-riddled placard, was the Lewis and Clark Trail—she'd stocked up on hokey junk and sentimental trinkets, and the stuff now commemorated a wandering path across state lines, over rivers, up mountains, into empty fields where battles had been fought and decided and down the streets of dirty, forgotten towns where once, long ago, something important had happened.

Jones gave her a shake and said, "Now all the rivers flow west."

"Jones?" She was disoriented, a child spooked on waking in unfamiliar surroundings. "I'm not feeling too good."

"You want to lie down?"

"I could use a beer," the girl said. "Something to kill this."

Jones eased the car over the breakdown line. The mountains cut a crown of darkness out of the night sky, and a row of telephone poles, silhouetted in the starlight, seemed like crosses planted along the highway. He arranged the backseat, shoving his duffle to the floor and unrolling the sleeping bag.

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The car shook as a semi passed, spraying a phalanx of gravel in its wake.

"Let's get there soon," the girl said.

"Get in back," Jones said.

"I'm praying," she said.

"That's good," he said. Jones ran his hand over the girl's head. Wispy strands of hair pulled loose and stuck to his palm. "We'll stop in the next town."

Back on the road, the wind dried his T-shirt, and the sweat-soaked cotton turned stiff as cardboard. Beneath him the worn tires rolled over the warm asphalt like the murmur of a river. On the move once more, he felt only relief, a sense of his body freed from its strict place in time, drifting through the huddled blue lights of towns named after Indians and cavalrymen and battles, after blind expectations and the comforts of the known past, after the sustaining beliefs and fears of pioneers. Outlook, Savage, Plentywood. Going west, names changed, became deposits of utopian history, places named Hope and Endwell, Wisdom and Independence and Loveland. Whenever the road signs flashed by, luminous for an instant, Jones felt as though he were journeying through a forgotten allegory.

The girl asked, "When do you think we'll be there?"

"We're not going to Las Vegas," Jones said. He had not known his decision until he spoke and heard the words aloud.

"Why not?"

"I'm taking you to a hospital."

"They'll send me home," the girl said.

"They might."

"Dad'll say you abducted me."

"You know that's not the deal."

"Don't matter," the girl said. "He'll say you're working for Satan and his demonic forces, even if you don't know it. He says just about everybody is."

"Well, I'm not," Jones said.

"You might be without you knowing it," the girl said.

They were crossing the Bitterroot. Jones lost radio reception, and so he listened to the girl's prayers, words coming to him in fragments, *Jesus* and *savior* and *amen,* the music of her

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voice carried away by the wind, choked off whenever she dry-heaved in the seat behind him. Somewhere in western Idaho she fell asleep, and for the next few hours Jones listened to the car tires sing. Outside Spokane, on an illuminated billboard set back in a wheat field, a figure of Jesus walked on water, holding a staff. Jones considered the odd concession to realism: a man walking on water would hardly need to support himself with a crutch. The thought was gone as soon as the billboard vanished behind him. No others took its place. Bored, he searched the radio dial for voices but for long empty stretches pulled in nothing but the sizzle of static, a strange surging cackle filling the car as if suddenly he'd lost contact with earth.

A red neon vacancy sign sputtered ambiguously, the *NO* weakly charged and half-lit. Behind the motel and across the railroad tracks, the Columbia River snaked through Wenatchee, flowing wide and quiet, a serene blue vein dividing the town from the apple orchards. The low brown hills were splotched with squares of green, patches of garden carved out of burnt land, and beyond them to the west, rising up, etched into the blue sky, a snowcapped mountain range rimmed the horizon like teeth set in some huge jaw.

"We're here," Jones said.

"Where?"

"Wen-a-tchee," he said.

"Wena-tchee," he tried again.

"Just a place," he said, finally. "Let's get upstairs."

In their room, Jones set the girl on the bed. He spritzed the sheets with tap water, cooling them, and opened the window. A hot breeze pushed the brown burlap curtains into the room. The gray, dusty leaves of an apple tree spread outside the window, and beneath the tree the unnatural blue of a swimming pool shimmered without revealing any depth in the morning sun. A slight breeze rippled the water, and an inflated lifesaver floated aimlessly across the surface.

The girl was kneeling at the foot of the bed, her hands folded and her head bowed in prayer. She was naked, her body

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a dull, white votary candle, the snuffed flame of her hair a dying red ember.

"Kneel here with me," she said.

"You go ahead," Jones said. He sat on the edge of the bed and pulled off his boots.

"It wouldn't hurt you," she said, "to get on your knees."

"We had this discussion before," he said.

"I believe it was a miracle," the girl said. She was referring to the remission of her cancer, the answered prayers. Her stepfather belonged to an evangelical sect that believed the literal rapture of Judgment Day was near at hand. Several dates he'd predicted for the end of time had already come and gone. Two months ago, he'd taken her out of medical treatment, refusing science in favor of prayer. Her illness bloomed with metaphoric possibilities and large portents for the congregation of the Church of the Redeemer in Carbondale and was used as a kind of augury, variously read as a sign of God's covenant, or as proof of Man's fallenness, his wickedness and sin. For a while she'd been in remission, and news of her cure had brought a host of desperate seekers to the church.

At a display in South Dakota, against the evidence of bones before them, the girl had said dinosaurs didn't die sixty million years ago. "It was about ten thousand years ago," she had insisted. Her stepfather believed they'd been on the boat with Noah.

"Some big ass boat," Jones had said. Jones no longer had any interest in arguing. But he said, "And now that you're sick again, what's that?"

"It's what the Lord wants."

"There's no talking to you," Jones said.

"We're all just here to bear witness," she said.

"Have your prayers ever been answered?"

"The night you came by the station, I asked for that. I prayed, and you came."

"I was hungry. I wanted a candy bar."

"That's what you think," the girl said. "But you don't know. You don't really know why you stopped, or what the plan is or anything. Who made you hungry? Huh? Think about that."

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The rush of words seemed to exhaust her. She wrapped a corner of the sheet around her finger and repeated, "Who made you hungry?"

"So you prayed for me, and I came," Jones said. "Me, in particular? Or just someone, anyone?" He stripped off his shirt, wadded it up and wiped the sweat from his armpits. "Your illness doesn't mean anything. You're just sick, that's all."

Jones cranked the hot water and stayed in the shower, his first in days, until it scalded his skin a splotchy pink. Finished, he toweled off, standing over the girl. She was choking down cries.

"Why don't you take a shower?" Jones said.

"Maybe I should go back home."

"Maybe you should just stand out there on the road and let your old dad's radar find you." Then Jones said, "If that's what you want, I'll get you a bus ticket. You can be on your way tomorrow."

The girl shook her head. "It's no-place to me," she said.

"The Eskimos don't have homes, either," Jones said. "They don't have a word for it. They can't even ask each other, Hey, where do you live?"

II

Dr. McKillop sat on an apple crate and pulled a flask from his coat pocket. The afternoon heat was bad, but the harsh light was worse; he squinted uphill, vaguely wishing he were sober. It was too late, though, and with a sense of anticipation, of happy fatality, he drank, and the sun-warmed scotch bit hard at the back of his throat. McKillop felt the alcoholic's secret pleasure at submitting to something greater than himself, a realignment with destiny: he took another drink. Swimming in the reflection of the silver flask, he noticed a young white man. He was tall and thin, his cheekbones sharp and high, and in the glare his deep eye sockets seemed empty,

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pools of cool blue shadow. When the man finally approached, McKillop offered him the flask.

"I was told in town I could find you here," Jones said.

McKillop nodded. "You must be desperate."

The doctor wiped dust and sweat from his neck with a sun-bleached bandana. One of the day pickers had fallen from a tree and broken his arm, and McKillop had been called to reset it. He was no longer a doctor, not legally, not since six months ago when he'd been caught prescribing cocaine to himself. The probationary status of his medical license didn't matter to the migrants who worked the apple orchards, and McKillop was glad for the work. It kept trouble at a distance.

"Let me guess," McKillop said. "You don't have any money? Or you're looking for pharmaceuticals?"

"The bartender at Yakima Suzie's gave me your name," Jones said.

"You can get drunk, you can smoke cigars and gamble in a bar. You can find plenty in a bar. I know I have." McKillop pressed a dry brown apple blossom between his fingers, then sniffed beneath his nails. "But a doctor, a doctor you probably shouldn't find in a bar." He looked up at Jones and said, "I've been defrocked."

"I'm not looking for a priest," Jones said. The doctor's stentorian voice and overblown statements were starting to annoy him. The doctor wore huaraches with tire-tread soles, and his toes were caked with dirt, and the long curled nails looked yellow and unhealthy. He knotted his long raggedy hair in a ponytail.

Jones remained silent while a flatbed full of migrants rumbled by, jouncing over a worn two-track of gray dust and chuckholes. The green of the garden, of the orchards he'd seen from the valley, was an illusion; the trail of rising dust blew through the trees and settled and bleached the branches and leaves bone gray. A grasshopper spit brown juice on Jones's hand; he flicked it away and said, "I've got a girl in pain."

"Well, a girl in pain." McKillop capped his flask and wiped his forehead again. He spat in the dust, a dry glob rolling up thick and hard at his feet. He crushed it away with the rubber

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heel of his sandal. He looked up into the lattice of leaves, the sun filtered through; many of the apples with a western exposure were still green on the branch. McKillop stood and plucked one of the unripe apples and put it in his pocket. "For later," he said.

The room smelled like rotting mayonnaise. Her body glistened with a yellow liquid. She'd vomited on herself, on the pillows, on the floor. Face down, she clutched the sheets and tore them from the bed. She rolled over on her back, kicking the mattress and arching herself off the bed, lifting her body, twisting as though she were a wrestler attempting to escape a hold.

Jones pinned her arms against the bed while she bucked, trying to free herself. Her teeth were clenched, then she gasped, gulping for air. Her upper lip held a delicate dew of sweat in a mustache of faint blonde hair. She made fists of her thin, skeletal hands, and then opened them, clawing Jones with her yellowed nails.

McKillop drew morphine from a glass vial and found a blue vein running in the girl's arm. A drop of blood beaded where the needle punctured her skin. McKillop dabbed the blood away with the bedsheet and pressed a Band-Aid over the spot.

The girl's body relaxed, as if she were suddenly without skeleton.

Windblown dust clouded the window. Jones slid it open along runners clogged with dirt and desiccated flies and looked down into the motel pool. Lit by underwater lights, it glowed like a jewel. A lawn chair lay on its side near the bottom, gently wavering in an invisible current.

"She needs a doctor," McKillop said.

"That's you," Jones said. "You're the doctor."

McKillop shook his head.

"Don't leave," the girl said. Only her index finger flickered, lifting slightly off the bed, as if all her struggle had been reduced to a tiny spasm.

"Wait outside," Jones said to the doctor.

When he'd gone, Jones turned on the television, a broken

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color set that bathed the room in a blue glow; he searched for a clear channel, but the screen remained a sea of pulsing static behind which vague figures swam in surreal distortion, auras without source. He stripped the bed and wetted a thin, rough towel with warm water and began to wipe the vomit off the girl's face, off her hard, shallow chest, off her stomach as it rose and fell with each breath. "Feels good," she said. Jones rinsed the towel and continued the ablution, working down her stick-thin legs and then turning her on to her stomach, massaging the tepid towel over her back and buttocks, along her thighs. The curtains fluttered, parting like wings and rising into the room. It was early, but the sun was setting in the valley, the brown rim of hills holding a halo of bright light, an emphatic, contoured seam of gold and different sounds—the screeching of tires, the jangling of keys, a dog barking—began to carry clearly, sounds so ordinary and near they seemed to have a source, not within the room, not out in the world, but in memory.

When the girl sank into sleep, Jones slipped out into the hallway.

"Your wife?" McKillop asked.

"Just a girl I picked up."

"Jesus, man." With forced jocularity, the doctor slapped Jones on the back. "You know how to pick them."

Out on the street dusk settled, a moment of suspension. The sky was still deep blue with a weak edge of white draining away in the west. An Indian crouched on the curb outside the motel, his face brown and puckered like a windfall apple in autumn.

Jones and McKillop entered a bar next door.

"I'm taking her to a hospital," Jones said.

"There's precious little a hospital can do," the doctor said. "Let's have a drink here," he called out. "They'll start a morphine drip. It'll keep her euphoric until she dies."

"Then I'll send her home," Jones said. In the navy he'd learned one thing, and for Jones it amounted to a philosophy: there was no real reason to go forward, but enormous penalties were paid by those who refused. He'd learned this lesson rub-

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bing Brasso into his belt buckle and spit shining his boots for inspections that never came. "I could leave right now," he said. "I could drive away."

"Why don't you," the doctor said. "Turn tail, that's what I'd do." He ordered boilermakers and drank his by dumping the shot of bourbon into the schooner of beer. He polished off his first drink and called for another round.

"Deep down," McKillop said, "I'm really shallow."

Jones said, "I had this feeling if I kept driving everything would be okay."

"The healing, recuperative powers of the West," the doctor said. "Teddy Roosevelt and all that. The West was a necessary invention of the Civil War, a place of harmony and union. From the body politic to the body—"

Jones only half-listened. He found himself resisting the doctor's glib reductions.

"I'd like to hit the road," McKillop was saying. The phrase had an antiquated sound. Even in the cool of the bar, McKillop was sweating. He pressed a fat finger down on a bread crumb, then flicked it away.

"You looked bad when you saw her," Jones said.

"I'll be alright," McKillop said. He downed his drink. "I'm feeling better now. You'll need help, but I'm not your doctor."

McKillop bought a roll of quarters and made a few sloppy calls to friends in Seattle, waking them, demanding favors for the sake of old times, invoking old obligations, twice being told to fuck off and finally getting through to an old resident friend at Mercy Hospital, who said he'd look at the girl if nothing else could be done.

"We'll take care of her," McKillop said to Jones. They walked down to the section of windowless warehouses and blank-faced cold-storage buildings, walked along cobbled streets softly pearled with blue lamplight, apple crates stacked up twenty, thirty feet high against the brick. Beyond the train tracks, the Columbia flowed quietly; a path of cold moonlight stretched across the water like a bridge in a dream, the first step always there, at Jones's feet. Through crate slats Jones saw eyes staring, men slumped in the boxes for the night, out of the

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wind, behind a chinking of newspaper, cardboard, fluttering plastic. Jones stopped. A canvas awning above a loading dock snapped in the breeze like a doused jib sail.

"Don't you worry, Jonesy boy," the doctor said. "We'll get her squared away. Tomorrow, in Seattle." He reached into his bag and handed Jones a vial and a syringe. "If it gets too much, the pain, you know, give her this. Only half, four or five milligrams. You can do it, right? Just find a vein."

A fire burned on the banks of the river. A circle of light breathed out and the shadows of stone-still men danced hilariously. A woman walked through the grass outside the circle; her legs were shackled by her own pants, blue jeans dropped down around her ankles; she stumbled, stood, stumbled, struggled. "I know what you want," she shouted back at the circle of men. "I know what you want." She fell, laughing hideously.

The doctor was clutching Jones's hand, squeezing and shaking it, and Jones got the idea that the doctor might never let go.

Outside the motel, the same wrecked Indian stood and approached Jones. His left cowboy boot was so worn down around the heel that the bare shoe tacks gave a sharp metallic click on the cement with each crippled step. He blinked and thrust a hand at Jones.

"My eyes hurt when I open 'em," he said. "And they hurt when I close 'em. All night I don't know what to do. I keep opening and closing my eyes."

Jones reached into his pocket and pulled a rumpled dollar loose from his wad of muster pay.

"I swear," the Indian said. "Somebody's making my eyes go black."

Jones gave him the bone. He tried to see in the man the facial lines of an Eskimo, but his skin was weathered, the lines eroded.

"SoHappy," he said.

"Me too," Jones said.

"No," the Indian said, thumping his chest. "SoHappy. Johnny SoHappy, that's me. Fucking me."

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He blinked and backed away, wandering off alone, shoe tacks roughly clawing the sidewalk.

•

The girl was awake, shrouded in white sheets, staring at the ceiling, her breathing shallow but regular. Jones lay in the bed beside her, suffering a mild case of the spins. The walls turned, soft and summery, like the last revolution of a carousel wobbling to a stop. He looked out the window. Under the moonlight each leaf on the apple tree was a spoonful of milk.

Jones felt the girl's dry, thin fingers wrap around his wrist like a bird clutching at a perch.

"I love you," she whispered. Her voice was hoarse and frightening.

Jones shut his eyes against the spinning room. The movement crept beneath his closed lids, and Jones opened his eyes, to no effect. The room continued to spin.

"How about you Jones? You could just say it, I wouldn't care if it wasn't the truth. Not anymore."

Jones pressed her hand lightly.

"Where are we, Jones?" she asked. "I mean, really. What's the name of this place?"

They were a long way from Carbondale, from the home he'd seen the night they left. An oak tree hiding the collapsing remains of a childhood fort, a frayed rope with knotted footholds dangling from the hatch, a sprinkler turning slowly over the grass, a lounge chair beneath a sun shade, a paper plate weighted against the wind by an empty cocktail glass.

"I'm hot," she said.

Jones lifted her out of bed. She was hot, but she wasn't sweating. Against his fingers, her skin felt dry and powdery, friable, as if the next breeze might blow it all away, and he'd be left holding a skeleton. He wrapped her in a white sheet. She hooked her arms around his neck, and Jones carried her, airy as balsa, into the aqueous green light of the hallway and down the steps.

"Where we going?" she asked.

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The surface of the pool shimmered, smooth as a turquoise stone. Jones unwrapped the sheet and let it fall. The girl was naked underneath.

"Hold on," Jones said.

He walked down the steps at the shallow end, the water washing up around his ankles, his knees, his waist, and then he gently lowered the girl until her back floated on the surface.

"Don't let go," she said, flinching as she touched water. In panic, she gasped for air.

"I won't," Jones said. "Just relax."

Her skin seemed to soak in water, drink it up like a dehydrated sponge, and she felt heavier, more substantial. Her arms and legs grew supple, rising and falling in rhythm to the water. He steered her around the shallow end.

"Except in songs on the radio," she said, "nobody's ever said they love me."

Her eyes were wide and vacant, staring up through the leaves of the apple tree, out past them into the night sky, the moon, the vault of stars.

"You think anybody's watching us?" the girl asked.

Jones looked up at the rows of darkened rooms surrounding the pool. Here and there a night-light glowed. Air conditioners droned.

"I doubt it," he said.

She let her arms spread wide and float on the surface as Jones eased her toward the edge of the pool. He lifted her out and set her down on the sheet. At the deep end of the pool, below the diving board, he saw the lounge chair, its yellow webbing and chrome arms shining in the beams of underwater light. He took a deep breath and dove in. The water was as warm as the air, easing the descent from one element to the next. Jones crept along the bottom until he found the chair. Pressure rang in his ears, and a dizziness spread through him as he dragged it along the length of the pool. For a moment he wanted to stop, to stay on the bottom and let everything go black; he held himself until every cell in his blood screamed and the involuntary instincts of his body craving air drove him

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back up and he surfaced, his last breath exploding out of him. He set the chair against the apple tree.

They sat beneath the tree while Jones caught his breath. A hot wind dried their skin.

"I liked Little Bighorn the best," the girl said.

"It was okay." Jones watched a leaf float across the pool. "You really think he's looking for you?"

"I know he is," she said. "He's got all his buddies on the police force that are saved—you know, born again."

"You want to go back there?"

The girl was quiet, then she said, "Weekends Dad and them hunt around under bridges by rivers, looking for graffiti with satanic messages. For devil worship you need the four elements. You need earth, wind, fire and water. That's what he says. So they look by rivers, and maybe they see some graffiti, or they find an old chicken bone, and they think they really got themselves something."

It seemed an answer, wired through biblical circuitry.

"Tomorrow you're going to a hospital," Jones said. "The doctor arranged it. Everything's set."

He carried the girl upstairs and placed her on the bed. In five weeks she'd gone from a girl he'd picked up in the heartland to an old woman, her body retreating from the world, shrunken and curled and lighter by the hour, it seemed. Her hair had never grown back, and the ulcerations from early chemo treatments had so weakened her gums that a tooth had come loose, falling out, leaving a black gap in a smile that should have been seductive to the young boys back in Carbondale. The whites of her eyes had turned scarlet red. Her limbs were skeletal, fleshless and starved. She'd said she was eighteen, but now she could have passed for eighty.

"You think I'll go to hell?"

"Probably."

"Jones—"

"Well, why do you talk like that?"

"I don't know." She clutched the sheet around her neck. "When I open my mouth these things just come out. They're the only words I have."

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"One of my tours," Jones said, "we were on maneuvers in the Mediterranean." A boiler exploded, he said, and a man caught fire in a pool of burning oil. Crazed, aflame, engulfed, the man ran in erratic circles on the deck, a bright, whirling light in the darkness, shooting back and forth like an errant Roman candle, while other men chased him, half-afraid to tackle the man and catch fire themselves. Finally, beyond all hope, out of his mind, the man jumped over the deck railing, into the sea. "You could hear the flames whipping in the wind as he fell," Jones said. "Then he was gone. It was the sorriest thing I ever witnessed." Afterwards, he'd helped extinguish the fire, and for doing his duty he'd been awarded a dime-sized decoration for heroism.

"Everywhere we go," she said, and there was a long pause as her breath gurgled up through lungs full of fluid, "there's never any air-conditioning."

Jones held her hand, a bone. He thought she coughed this time, but again she was only trying to breathe. Suddenly he did not want to be in bed beside her. But he couldn't move.

"The Eskimos live in ice huts," he said.

"Sounds nice right now."

"It's very cold," Jones continued.

"I wish we were going there."

The girl coughed, and then curled into a fetal ball. "It's like hot knives stabbing me from inside." she said.

Jones lifted himself from the bed. He turned on the bedside lamp and took the morphine and the syringe from his shirt-pocket. "The first explorers thought Eskimos roamed from place to place because they were poor," he said. "They thought the Eskimos were bums." He ripped the cellophane wrapper from the syringe and pushed the needle into the vial, slowly drawing the plunger back until half the clear liquid had been sucked into the barrel. "They were always on the move," he said. The girl bit into the pillow until her gums bled and left an imprint of her mouth on the case. Her body had an alertness, a tension that Jones sensed in the tortured angles she held her arms at, the faint weak flex of her atrophied muscles. She raised her head and opened her mouth wide, her startled red

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eyes searching the room as if to see where all the air had gone. " But when you think about it, you understand that it's efficient." Jones pushed the air bubbles out of the syringe until a drop of morphine beaded like dew at the tip of the needle. "Movement is the only way for them to survive in the cold. Even their morality is based on the cold, on movement." Jones now continued speaking only to dispel the silence and the lone sound of the girl's labored breathing. He unclenched her hand from the sheets and bent her arm back, flat against the bed. "They don't have police," he said, "and they don't have lawyers or judges. The worst punishment for an Eskimo is to be left behind, to be left in the cold." Inspecting her arm, he found the widest vein possible and imagined it flowing all the way to her heart and drove the needle in.

McKillop had taken the girl's purse and dumped the contents on the bed. He rummaged through it, and found a blue gumball, safety pins, pennies, a shopping list and several pamphlets from which he read. "Listen," he said. "'For centuries lovers of God and of righteousness have been praying: Let your kingdom come. But what is that kingdom that Jesus Christ taught us to pray for? Use your Bible to learn the who, what, when, why and where of the Kingdom.'" He laughed. "Ironic, huh?"

"We don't know, do we?" Jones said.

"Oh come on," the doctor said. He took up a scrap of notepaper. "Blush. Lipstick—Toffee, Ruby Red. Two pair white cotton socks. Call Carolyn."

"Stay out of her stuff," Jones said.

"I was looking for ID," he said. "What's her name?"

Jones thought for a moment and then said, "It's better that you don't know."

"You didn't OD her, did you?"

"No," Jones said. Once last night he'd woken to the sound of the girl's voice, calling out. She spoke to someone who was not in the room and began to pick invisible things out of the air. Watching her struggle with these phantoms had made Jones feel horribly alone. Delirious, she ended by singing the

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refrain of a hymn. He said to the doctor, "I thought about it though."

"You could tell the truth. It's rather unsavory, but it's always an option."

Jones looked at the doctor. "It's too late," he said.

"I've tried the truth myself, and it doesn't work that well anyway. Half the time, maybe, but no more. What good is that? The world's a broke-dick operation. The big question is, who's going to care?"

"Her family," Jones said. "Born-again Christians."

"I was raised a Catholic." McKillop pulled a silver chain from around his neck and showed Jones a tarnished cross. "It was my mother's religion. I don't believe, but it still spooks me."

"This is against the law."

"If you sent her home, there'd be questions."

"There'll be questions anyway," Jones said. "Her stepdad's a fanatic. He'll be looking for me. He believes in what he's doing, you know?"

"I vaguely remember believing—"

"Not everything has to do with you," Jones said. He felt the sadness of language, the solitude of it. The doctor had no faith beyond a system of small ironies; it was like trying to keep the rain off by calling to mind the memory of an umbrella.

The doctor had dispensed with the nicety of a flask and now drank straight from the bottle.

"Never made it home last night," McKillop said.

"You look it," Jones said.

"I got lucky," McKillop said. "Sort of." He wiped his lips and said, "I wish I had a doughnut." He pulled a green apple from his pocket, buffing it on the lapel of his wrinkled jacket. He offered the bottle to Jones. Jones shook his head. "I'd watched this woman for a long time, desired her from afar, and then suddenly there I was, in bed with her, touching her, smelling her, tasting her. But I couldn't get it up."

"Maybe you should stop drinking."

"I like drinking."

"It's not practical," Jones said.

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"Quitting's a drastic measure," McKillop said. He took a bite of the apple. "For a man who gets lucky as little as I do."

"I'll see you," Jones said.

III

By afternoon he had crossed the bridge at Deception Pass and driven south and caught a ferry to Port Townsend. He drove west along 101 and then veered north, hugging the shoreline of the Strait of Juan de Fuca, passing through Pysht and Sekiu, driving until he hit Neah Bay and the Makah Reservation, when finally there was no more road. It had remained hot all the way west, and now a wildfire burned across the crown of a mountain rising against the western verge of the reservation. The sky turned yellow under a pall of black smoke. Flecks of ash sifted like snow through the air. White shacks lined either side of the street, staggering forward on legs of leaning cinder block, and a few barefoot children played in the dirt yards, chasing dust devils. Several girls in dresses as sheer and delicate as cobwebs stood shielding their eyes and staring at the fire. Sunlight spread through the thin fabric, skirts flickering in the wind, so that each of the young girls seemed to be going up in flames.

Jones moved slowly through town, raising a trail of white dust, which mingled with the black ash and settled over the children, the shacks, a scattering of wrecked cars, and then along the foot of the mountain he followed an eroded logging road until it too vanished. A yellow mobile home sat on a bluff, and behind it, hidden by a brake of wind-crippled cedar, was the ocean. Jones heard the surf and caught the smell of rough-churned sea. A man in overalls came out of the mobile home—to Jones, he looked like an Eskimo. Jones switched off the ignition. The car rocked dead, but for a moment he felt the pressure of the entire country he'd crossed at his back, the vibration of the road still working up through the steering column, into his hands and along his arms, becoming an ache in his shoulders, a numbness traveling down his spine. Then

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the vibrations stopped, and he felt his body settle into the present.

Jones got out of the car. The man hooked a thumb in his breast pocket, the ghost habit of a smoker. Behind cracked lips, his teeth were rotten. He watched a retrofit bomber sweep out over the ocean, bank high and round and circle back over the hill, spraying clouds of retardant. The chemicals fell away in a rust red curtain that closed over the line of fire.

"How'd it start?" Jones asked.

"Tiny bit of broken bottle will start a fire, sun hits it right." The man lit a cigarette. "Been a dry summer. They logged that hill off mostly, and don't nobody burn the slash. Where you headed?"

Jones said he was just driving.

"Used to be a love colony down there," the man said. He pointed vaguely toward the ocean. "You get the hippies coming back now and again, looking for the old path down. But the trails all growed over." The man ran his tongue over the black gum between missing front teeth. "I thought maybe you was one of them."

"No," Jones said. "Never been here before."

"You can park, you want," he said. "There's a game trail runs partways down."

"Thanks."

"You'll see the old Zellerbach mill."

He found the abandoned mill in ruin, a twisted heap of metal. He sat on a rusted flume and pulled a patch of burnt weeds from the foundation. With a stick he chipped at the hard, dry ground and dug out three scoops of loose dirt, wrapping them in one of the girl's shirts. When he finished, he sat against a stump, counting the growth rings with his finger until near heartwood he'd numbered 200 years.

A clam-shell chime chattered like cold teeth beneath the awning of a bait shop. Inside the breakwater, boats pulled at their moorings. Jones walked up and down the docks of the marina until he found a Livingston slung by davits to the deck of a cabin cruiser. The windows of the cruiser were all dark,

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canvas had been stretched across the wheelhouse, and the home port stenciled across the stern was Akutan. He lowered the lifeboat into the water, pushed off and let himself drift quietly away from the marina.

When he'd rowed out into the shipping lane, Jones pull-started the twenty-horse Evinrude, and followed a flashing red beacon out around the tip of Cape Flattery to the ocean. He kept just outside the line of breaking waves, hugging the shore, the boat tossed high enough at times along the crest of a swell to see a beach wracked with bone gray driftwood. Jones pulled the motor and rode the surf until the hull scraped sand. He loaded the girl into the boat, up front for ballast.

He poled himself off the sand with the oar and then rowed. Each incoming wave rejected his effort, angling the bow high and pushing the boat back in a froth of crushed white foam. Finally he managed to cradle the boat in the trough between breaking waves. The motor kicked out of the water with a high-rev whine, and Jones steered for open sea, heading due west. Beyond the edge of the shelf, the rough surface chop gave way to rolling swells, and Jones knew he was in deep water. He'd forgotten how black a night at sea was, how even the coldest, dying star seemed near and bright in the dark. He became afraid and drew the world in like a timid child, trembling with unreasonable fears—the terrible life below him, the girl's stepfather and his fanatic pursuit, his own fugitive life in flight from this moment. If it became history he would be judged and found guilty. Spindrift raked over the bow, splashing his face. The sea heaved in a sleepy rhythm. He crossed the black stern of a container ship at anchor, four or five stories of high wall, and when he throttled back to a dead drift he heard voices from the deck top, human voices speaking in a language he did not understand.

He ran another mile and cut the engine. The round world was seamless with the night sky, undivided, the horizon liquid and invisible except for a spray of stars that flashed like phosphorescence, rising out of the water. A cool breeze whispered over the surface. August was over. He'd piled the sleeping bag with beach rocks, and then he'd cleaned the car of evidence,

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collected the souvenirs, the trinkets, the orange smiles, the wig, and stuffed them down into the foot of the bag, knotting it shut with nylon rope. He'd taken the Bible, opened it to the genealogy, and scratched the month and year into the margins. Jones considered the possibility, as he rocked in the trough of a swell, that all this would one day break free from its deep hold in the sea, wash to the surface, the bumper stickers from Indian battles and decals commemorating the footpaths and wagon trails of explorers and pioneers, the resting places of men and women who'd left their names to towns and maps. And then the girl herself, identified by her remains, a story told by teeth and bones, interpreted.

Jones looped a rope tether around the handle of his flashlight and tied the other end to the sleeping bag. He checked the beam, which shone solidly in the darkness, a wide swath of white light carved out of the air. He unpackaged the soil he'd collected from the collapsed mill and sprinkled it across the sleeping bag, spreading earth from head to foot. It seemed a paltry ritual—the dirt, the light—but he was determined to observe ceremony. With his tongue he licked away a coating of salt from the rim of his lips. His hands were growing cold and stiff. He hoisted the head end of the bag over the port side and then pivoted the girl's feet around until the whole bag pitched overboard. Jones held it up a final instant, clutching the flashlight, allowing the air bubbles to escape, and then let go. Down she swirled, a trail of light spinning through a sea that showed green in the weakening beam and then went black. In silence Jones let himself drift until, borne away by the current, he could no longer know for certain where she'd gone down.

Back within the breakwater, Jones tied the lifeboat with a slack line to a wooden cleat. The mountain had vanished from view, swallowed by darkness, but a prevailing westerly had blown the wildfire across its crown, and a flare of red yellow flame swept into the sky. An old Makah trudged up the road, dragging a stick through the dust, leaning on it when he stopped to watch the hieroglyphic write itself in fire on the edge of the reservation. Jones sat on the dock, dangling his

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legs. Flakes of feathery black ash drifted through the air and fanned lightly against his face. Spume crusted and stung his lips, and he was thirsty. He listened to the rhythm of the water as it played an icy cool music in the cadenced clinking of ropes and pulleys and bell buoys. Out beyond the breakwater the red and green running lights of a sailboat appeared, straggling into port. The wind lifted the voices of the sailors and carried them across the water like a song. One of the sailors shouted, "There it is." He stood on the foredeck and pointed toward the banner of flames rising in the sky.

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Albert Goldbarth

Marriage, and Other Science Fiction

1. A Traveler

A millipede-thing the size of a Brahma bull is devouring
palm fronds that are longer than stretch limos.
He watches the multiplied sun along its segmented armor; then,
again, he works the gleaming Lever.
When the blear and nausea
dissipate, he's on a mossy rise overlooking
a tannery compound (this would make it—what?
12, 1300 A.D.? and the read-out panel confirms this). He
studies the coltish apprentice scouring out a hide
with grabs of pigeon dung rubbed vigorously, but then the breeze
aboutfaces and the lingering death-stench clobbers him truly
as if it were a pitched rock, so he shoulders into the armlong
Lever yet again, millennia whirring
like slot machine fruit,
and when he stops it's snowing
white babushkas about fantastical eyrie cupolas no 20th,
21st, or even 22nd-century eyes would recognize. Then,
floating out of that city's streets: an ululating
of human woe he's come to know, whatever the year, and whatever
the current stage of our inadequate neocortex.

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2. Us

You were moaning. It was that low and fluttery
black-leaf-of-a-moan
—and so I knew your sister was dying
again. I could have waked you, saved you
from the merciless repeating of that othertime, but
finally saw I had no right to break the painful
peace your dream was making. I stroked your back,
just that—and lightly, not enough to jostle one camellia
in the vase they set on the sill of that room
in your mind, while the terrible turbojet
of her iron lung filled the universe with its roar. Before
you calmed back into an evener sleep, a few of *my*
ghosts skirled around the bedroom darkness, having been
emboldened by your own—and one or two of them really
ugly, they would translate maybe
into primitive sea-life: vampire molluscs . . .
When
I woke, you were stroking my back. The sky
was gray already, tinctured by the iodine smear of dawn.
Your hand was marked by fang-edged seashell imprints.
A black leaf was stuck to my palm.

3. Thirteen

"What if he stopped in some year when they put a building
right there,
you know" and Irwin Benovitz flaps his hands "right there
where the Time Machine" flapping in search of an accurate
term
"*materialized!* He'd explode or he'd become the bricks of the
building
forever, right?"

When I look back now at those two, at their urgent traipse through Wells and endless ill-writ ripoff Wells, their great hormonally-powered and slightly pathetic enthusiasm

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for waking in any tomorrow other than normalcy's, I feel I should
apologize to the other one, the friend—no matter
how many Levers he'll press in his imagination, buttons, dials,
his future is only his becoming
me: a man in a house, who loves his wife, they
go about their daily fracas and deal with their small interfacing
sadnesses as best they can. Maybe he'll forgive me
that; I've tried to make some friendships and a few words
durable—anyway, time is impossible. The melting snowflake
gears of the engine of time. Klein bottle time. The switchback,
serpent-shimmy, parallel traintrack, purl and surd and
do-si-do inscrutable movements of time.
"Yeah, and
what if somebody else *was living on that spot?*"
says the friend "*right there,* they became this two-in-one creature,
he opened his eyes surrounded all day by this other person all through him?"
First they're silent—then they giggle, it's such
an enormity, and they're thirteen.

4. Forty-four

Silverplate a cucumber, then equally silverly fin it
like an angelfish: you'd have a spiffy 1990 rocketship,
by 1930's standards. And that thirteen-year-old boy
I was in 1961?—was raised in that
sci-fi tradition, and is sure the years ahead mean life
in Lunaville (a "bubble city": remember?), its citizens zooming
through the sky on the personal dual jet-blasts
of "fly-tanks" (worn like backpacks) . . .
What
does he think of us now? He's still alive, of course, just
layered-under in a sticky film of 31 succeeding years;
he'll stir, and wake, and find us fretting
over last night's muggers at the corner, and

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not pirates on the moon. What would he make
of your cyst? and why, when waiting
late word from your oh-bee-gee-why-en, do I imagine this historic
inchling squirm in me, and dream of the Lever, that powerful
staunch brass scepter with the octahedronal crystal knob,
and its blurry crosstemporal promise . . .
huh? you
use the word "distracted"—as if I were somewhere else.
As if you looked and saw I was missing a hand,
or a nugget of brain, or a radish of meat
from my heart, and what I showed instead was some similar part
of a thirteen-year-old once-me . . .
There's
that lovely fairy tale, six brothers
turned to swans and then turned back to human selves,
except for the youngest, whose spell is incomplete
by some few words, "and like the others he became human again;
but one arm was the wing of a swan."

5. Distance

NOW! Beamish and Stanhope's UNIVERSAL LAP ARMOIRE
meets ALL OF YOUR TRAVEL NEEDS—is Especially Jointed
for Portability—Serve TEA in Wedgwood Cups,
on an inhospitable Himalayan slope! or read your
MR. DICKENS before sleep, in the wilds of Hottentot Africa! . . .

•

So: there are clever means by which to keep appalling otherness
at safe arm's-length, in distance-travel—"lesser travel,"
the secret corps of Chrononauts sneeringly call it.
For them,
their suddenly being birthed into a new gestalt is

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painfully disorienting, far beyond contrivances' remediations.
Once I thought I could study the mackerel-gray or sepia
crowd scenes in, say, turn-of-the-century photographs, and
recognize the rare time-traveler trying to blend indigenously,
by his unconcealable condescension ("Oh, *I* knew this
was going to happen!") but, no; especially on those just
arrived,
it's always a central look of horror, and confusion, and
an excitement that feeds on horror. Twice
I've seen a face I though was Irwin Benovitz's
—once
among a clutch of stern-cheeked hayseed gawkers queuing up
at the flap of Natasha's Tent of Dance Exotique, at a dumpy
fair;
and once among a group of conscriptees standing joking,
smirking,
a few of them doing a softshoe shuffle, waiting on the pier
for the ship that will take them to die in the trenches. I *think*
it was Irwin—after all, it's been 31 years. Maybe
while I grew up and distant, he stayed true to those fancies,
researched them, met others who wore the invisible insignia,
and
joined that most elite band of timetrippers; maybe he even
commandeers a Lever, ornate and substantial, and oiled as if
with the silky byproducts of all of human evolution,
just as we'd dreamed it. I can't imagine the thrust
of his exits, the rays and webbings he breaks through, or
his entrances into alien worlds. For us, it's confusing enough
to travel ahead in time by 24 hours, bringing
ontogeny's living zoo into a new day: all that
avianswoop and lizardchill that's never left us really, but
must wake sometimes in an incomprehensible future
—the homo sapiens psyche—shrieking, ribboning
mindstuff with its claws . . .
I turn to you, and see
you're still one-half in dream: as if part nude
and part unsculpted marble. Here we are,
7 A.M., on the current submicrodot nanoedge of the Big Bang,

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groping at love, in the red shift. How can we travel
through space so *fast,*
we drag such baggage with us?

6. A Traveler / Us

The rain forest tribe, where time goes slow and
partite, like the remnant rain of last night's storm
that still drips, from the leaves, all through the morning . . .
The endless present tense
in which the stale breaths of Hassid scholars
repeat The Word of the Glorious Host of Hosts . . .
The ton of bricks
being hauled toward the recess bell on a schoolroom clock . . .

So many.
I remember the shop
at the bowbend of an impossibly-potholed lane
outside of Grasse: perhaps 200 clocks,
from hand-sized cuckooettes to burnished deeply-tolling
grandfather clocks like sentry boxes, all of them
ticking, each of them keeping—slightly or gigantically—
an independent time. It's like a snowfall
—each flake different, but contributing in synchrony
to something so vast it's beautiful and
serially fierce in its implications, at once . . .
It must be *some* great metaphysical conundrum like this,
that keeps a figure, a man? or a woman?,
staring out a window
through the borders-blurring downfall
of a bitter winter night that could be any bitter winter night
—but is, in this poem, January, 1992.

•

The Traveler has gingerly parked his Machine
beneath a rocky overhang, and now

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he's out walking—gently wafting snow, but thick, and nearly
making linen of the air. The one light
on in our livingroom calls him—here
might be some clue that specifies the general "when"
of his read-out panel. He approaches not exactly
stealthily, but not forthrightly either; anyway, he's too
cautious to hazard much more than quietly standing in a
snowbank
scanning our house from across the yard, so
can't determine anything but a vague, gray figure
staring out into the night and then—as if at someone's
summons—turning back in to the room. A long wait.
Snow, like units for counting a long wait. Then
(and this he could have predicted) the ululation: something
vocal
that could easily mean pleasure, or could be a marker
set on the scale between small pique and despair. Do
even *they* know which?—he thinks this is the age
where people "worked at" "marriage," and all of those
otherwise
very distinctive concepts overlapped. He
tries to remember: did they tell time by notched bones?
or by monitoring their protein-code mutation? or the cesium
atom?
No, no—now he remembers this age.
A "watch," they called it: two hands held a face.

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Four Poems by William Wadsworth

The Snake in the Garden Considers Daphne

My less erotic god condemned
my taste for girls less classical
than you, the kind that can't resist
a dazzling advance, or trees that stand
for love. Of course, I understand
up there it seems to be all light
and prelapsarian elation—but bear
in mind your lower half that gropes
for water, the slender roots you spread
in secret to fascinate the rocks,
while sunlight pulls apart your leaves
and flights of birds arouse the air
around you. If only I could run
a brazen hand along this wood
and feel your heart accelerate
beneath it, rising to your lips.
If only you could pick the whitest
petals from the holy orchard
where I patrol the crevices
and slink along my damned gut,
you could arrange them as you wished
and change the ending of our story.
But we're disarmed, and nothing changes
in our natural gardens—we cannot grasp
the word *hope,* which the ones we've tempted
find always at their fingertips.

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The Spider

In the hissing air, two lovers lie
with rain and mist, the trees rinsed
in soft transmissions of static.

The lovers peer from hammocks of flesh
where time, subtle as a spider,
hoards them in its net.

The man drowsing in the woman's hair
smells rain descending there.
The hours feed on them like flies.

Sometimes in a flash the spider
snares them with a photograph.
Stung by pleasure, the lovers pose.

They move in unison like wings.
This continues in the photograph
while the flesh gets rinsed away.

Overhead, the sun spins. A leaf
returns its bitter drops of rain.
The sunlight drops in golden threads.

The man returns his bitter life
and watches while she swims away.
She climbs back into the sun.

He turns back into the mist.
All is lost now but the smell of rain
descending in her hair,

and both of them are buried there.

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Saturn

It was our favorite game. My sisters and I
escorted him to the usual place
at the foot of the stairs. His slicked-back hair
gleaming black, he grinned down at us,

pulled off his jacket and tie: big neck, big chest,
ex-tackle for the Big Ten. He closed his eyes
as he lay on the floor and sprawled on his back.
He passed into a solemn hibernation.

My pulse raced. Anne sat on his legs and grabbed
his ankles, her strong arms rigid as she pinned
his feet. Nancy knelt on his left arm.
I remember her blond bangs and battered shins

who with gap-toothed fury whispered He's sleeping. Quick!
I dug my knees deep in his biceps, pressed
my hands in the thick fur of his wrist.
I stared at my hands.

Then his chest moved with a groan, his white shirt
rose and fell. I smelled my father's body,
the complexity of his sweat. The hand flexed—
we cried out when suddenly the whole frame

shifted. We tried to escape,
but he pulled us all into the air
with a growl and swayed as he stood, kissing
the combined bodies of his three children.

And we were convinced in our ecstasy
that our father was eating us.
And we believed he would not put us down.
And the hand, the arm, the hairy wrist,

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the smell of sweat, the gleaming head,
are more real than my own body now.
My sisters kneel on the floors of their houses.
They are searching for his arms and legs.

I know what happens next. I stare at my hand.

Bloom's Photograph

In Reykjavík that year the bomb
talks failed, but we survived among
the sweet dead leaves that lay along
the esplanade before Grant's Tomb.

They spiralled into wind-banked heaps
between the benches and the faded
grass; the season escalated
elsewhere, but here the *clever hopes*

blew lightly down. Safe beside
each other, we were reading Joyce
when across the street a white Rolls Royce
pulled up outside a church. A bride

walked out into the light, exalted—
as if the future, gowned in white,
had made a sudden promise in spite
of Reykjavík. This vision, gilt

by autumn light, had interrupted
Molly Bloom's adulteries,
had stopped the fading of the leaves,
but then the newlyweds abruptly—

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went their way. That faded shot
of Mrs. Bloom her husband keeps
adulterates the bride; one sweep
of the wind, and the greenest leaf does not

survive. The scene must change. Ulysses
Grant at the height of battle would smoke
cigars and scribble notes. He soaked
the fields with blood in Tennessee,

and buried his conscience in a glass
of whiskey; he told General Lee
at Appomattox that victory
was sad—"he did not care to pass

humiliation on." He lived
without illusions. So grant us all
another cold and golden fall
and knowledge as to how to leave

the scene; the bride took off her dress
that night while gangs of boys played ball
against a mausoleum wall.
We shut the book on Molly's "Yes."

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Three Poems by Henri Cole

The Christological Year

on my birthday

The record skips in the parlor
when the gurney wheels past.
Mother's on her way to maternity.
On the 16th green Father's putt misses its cup,
his Japanese caddy tuning the instrument
of his mind Buddha-fashion in the grass.
A cosmographer's blue Pacific sea
illuminates the horizon.
West is faraway as sentimental honeymoon years
wavering in a crater of Nevada sunlight.
I am nowhere and everywhere.
A vague shape in a blue peignoir
(could it have been a kimono?)
holds me in its arms.
A sleep-inducing sickness takes me from myself.
Dust on the shelf where figures once stood
maps a world that will meet in me:
Father's walky-talky voice from the Arctic;
Venus's-flytrap locking its teeth
on Mother's diamond ring;
wigwams pitched in the Shenandoah;
my saucy angelfish, who ate his wife,
and my old-world chameleon,
whose stomach for houseflies was prodigious;
a six-ton black-and-white orca, midair,
his flippers grasped by a trainer
straddling him bareback;
the child's psychopathology

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of lying to keep adulthood at bay;
the Caspian and Black seas sweeping Noah and me away;
three days of hiccoughing nervously;
The Visible Man's motor and visceral nerves,
a fulcrum of red and blue;
body rashes; blood chemistries;
astigmatic visions of ecstasy in a tidewater bog;
offertory baskets carrying our quarters away
(would He take me too?); Miss Angelo—
I cut her lawn—who secretly was a man;
bolstering a brooding, besotted parent;
a playmate's cleft palate,
the hairline fissure holding me in thrall;
the branch of rainless lightning that took Scotty,
leviathans thrashing us, at Hatteras;
the forbidden wish—to be dead—granted;
a railcar bearing you towards me.
My thirty-third summer.
The dispassionate lake of adulthood widening.
At the playground a fountain
still bubbles on the lawn.
Could I ever not reach the jet to slake my thirst?
In our classroom, on the science wall,
at the round earth's imagined corners,
cherubim rehearse their trumpets.
We are in the ultraviolet past.
I am part in an everglade,
part on an iceberg,
as now a bee drones about my wrist,
and as I write the lilacs on my desk
droop their heavy heads, letting fall
a kind of purple, metaphysical spray.

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Sacrament

On the way to Mass, by chance,
I spotted you on the boulevard at a café
with your wife and her mother.
You were wearing the lovely gold cross
my father gave me when I was a boy.
After each sip of her drink,
your wife tucked her bangs behind her ears,
recrossed her china white legs.
I have given you back to her,
locked the letters in a box.
Laughing at something being said,
you raised your arm in the same gesture
as the night we met in the park,
when a woman walking a shepherd spat at us.
Do you remember the wet, odorless grass
in which we sat, how it shone
like the back of an animal?
At one point your wife's mother
reached across in an impassioned way
and brushed something from your sweater,
as if the fur of that animal
was what she'd seen
and with her hand wanted to say
they wouldn't let you go again.

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The World

How could I not have taken him home:
his eyes shone a gentian blue,
his name was Jesus, and I found him alone

by a river? Party boats, little monochromes
of pleasure, sailed past at interludes.
How could I not have taken him home?

The sky was black as Epistle leather and shone
against the penknife he wielded in view,
when he said his name and that he was alone.

The leopard cannot change his spots (they're sewn
into his fur), yet he licks them through and through.
How could I not have taken him home?

Good-bye to a crystal compass, some cuff links owned
by Father, even my glossy of you!
When at last I thought I was alone,

I shut myself in the bright bathroom and groaned
with fear to find a perfect dirty palm print lewdly
waving at me. How could I not have taken him home,
camped like Jesus on the Harlem banks alone?

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Marc Woodworth

Lovis Corinth at Walchensee

The bodies line this lake of suicides.
I visit the locked shed
Where lovers carve their summer oaths. Inside
The corpses gather. Drunk or mad,

Some found their depth in these black waters.
Others, more sane than I,
Lost to sorrows another month would cure,
Took Goethe's road from Munich, pining

Like stock Werthers for some pretty thing.
The Poet stopped to sketch
The church, then travelled on. I stay and train
My eye to read the lake's essay on death.

This September's page is blurred by sweat—
It's mortal weather. All
Smells heightened: lakeweed, fir, and shit.
My body longs for the chaste air of Fall

But Germany spawns only a rank wind—
Trenches filled with boys
And old men dying as they hold their ground . . .
Still a painter, I stare down this shore

For stasis' sake and find in it *landscape,*
That old trope for calm,
Until I see my Larch slashing the lake
With its stiff spine, irradiating harm,

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Inking the water with its brutal sap.
What leaks from its branches
Negates the lake's achievement, collapses
The cross-hatched surface—its fine meniscus

Articulating the desire of the wind—
With charnel depths
Where corpses whisper, *rescind, rescind*
And the currentless calm means nothing.

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Three Poems by Roger Weingarten

P.S.

Don't forget that while my legs
were clamped around the mule's
ribs climbing a defunct

streambed into the cloud forest
of Costa Rica, I was picturing your lips
pursed as you cut your diaphragm

into confetti, as I, like a sperm
genetically programmed
to swim in reverse, backed

out of our future into Central America
to catch my breath. The mule
didn't press me, but when the trail

turned steep, it sent my renegade
carcass into a nosedive that ended
in a tree overhanging a cliff.

Like a Hyacinth Macaw
screaming across the gorge,
your laughter smashed against the bars

of my concussion. Brooklyn Bob,
the guide, paid no mind when I declared
I was hunky-dory. He lifted me like an armload

of saplings to the beast and whipped us
all the way to the cloud forest
infirmary, where my leg is elevated

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like a sundial in the shade
or the blade of a scissors
in plaster. I know you might

not even bring the tip
of your letter opener to this
tempting, international blue, airmail envelope

overflowing with good news. I know that I'm
a coward and crazy to ask
for another shot, but I gave

Brooklyn Bob your likeness
drawn with charcoal on kangaroo pouch
briefs and warned about the red

highlights of your hair, your short
fuse, and please—I'm coming down
with a fever that makes you lose

bits of memory in a labyrinth
of dreams that breed like clouds, day
or night, until the past turns

white and vaporous—hurry. It
could last for weeks or years
and I don't want to lose

any more of you.

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E.S.P.

I was watching the last minutes
of the '76 Summer Olympics when

guess whose fingers covered my eyes,
her wet suit pressed between

her raised nipple and my shoulder blade?
I imagined a Red Sea

of eyes around the globe
glued to the hundred French

Canadian Catholic school girls
dancing the hokey-pokey into the five

Olympic circles. Through her fingers
parted like venetian blinds, I spied

the twirling crush of long skirts,
the flares of flash attachments,

and glowsticks, like sea urchins,
flickering in the engorged

stadium. Eyes
in the back of my head, an endangered

species, scanned the tip
of her tongue between her lips. There was

a hush and groan
in Montreal and in our furnished

room in the Bible Belt, just
as the voiceover assured us that

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what we were witnessing—the *gendarme*
running with a towel after the pale

scalloped cheeks of the streaker, who
cut a path bearing his own Olympic

torch into the dance
of interlocking circles that scattered

across the great screen above the stadium
of the international dream—was not

on the program, then guess
who pulled the plug on the TV?

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Geography IV

Until he followed her into the stairwell
of the parking garage, he was no one.

Until he tried to bend her backward
over the metal bannister, holding a blade

to the side of her throat, he was camouflaged
against the gray concrete. Until she grabbed

his belt buckle and with the other hand
dropped the bloodshot

eye of her cigarette into his almost
extinct volcano, even his Eagle

Scout son got lost trying
to find his hideout. She kicked him

unconscious, severed his ring
finger with his folding

hunter, then held it like a torch
for the automatic

cameras of the press swarming
like yellow jackets over the contour

map of marriage in the New World, August,
1990.

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Portfolio

Excerpts from Autobiography

Gary Curtis

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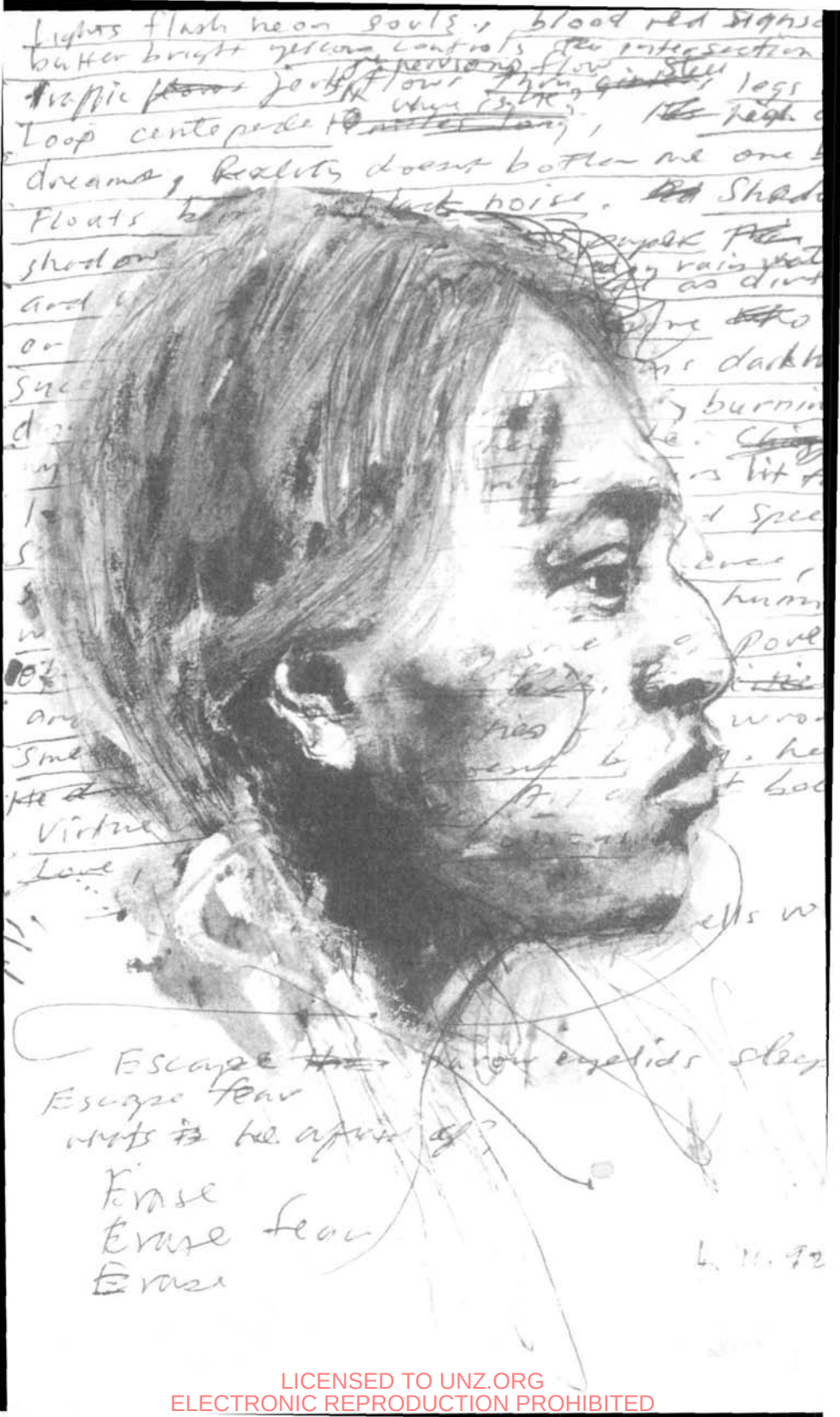

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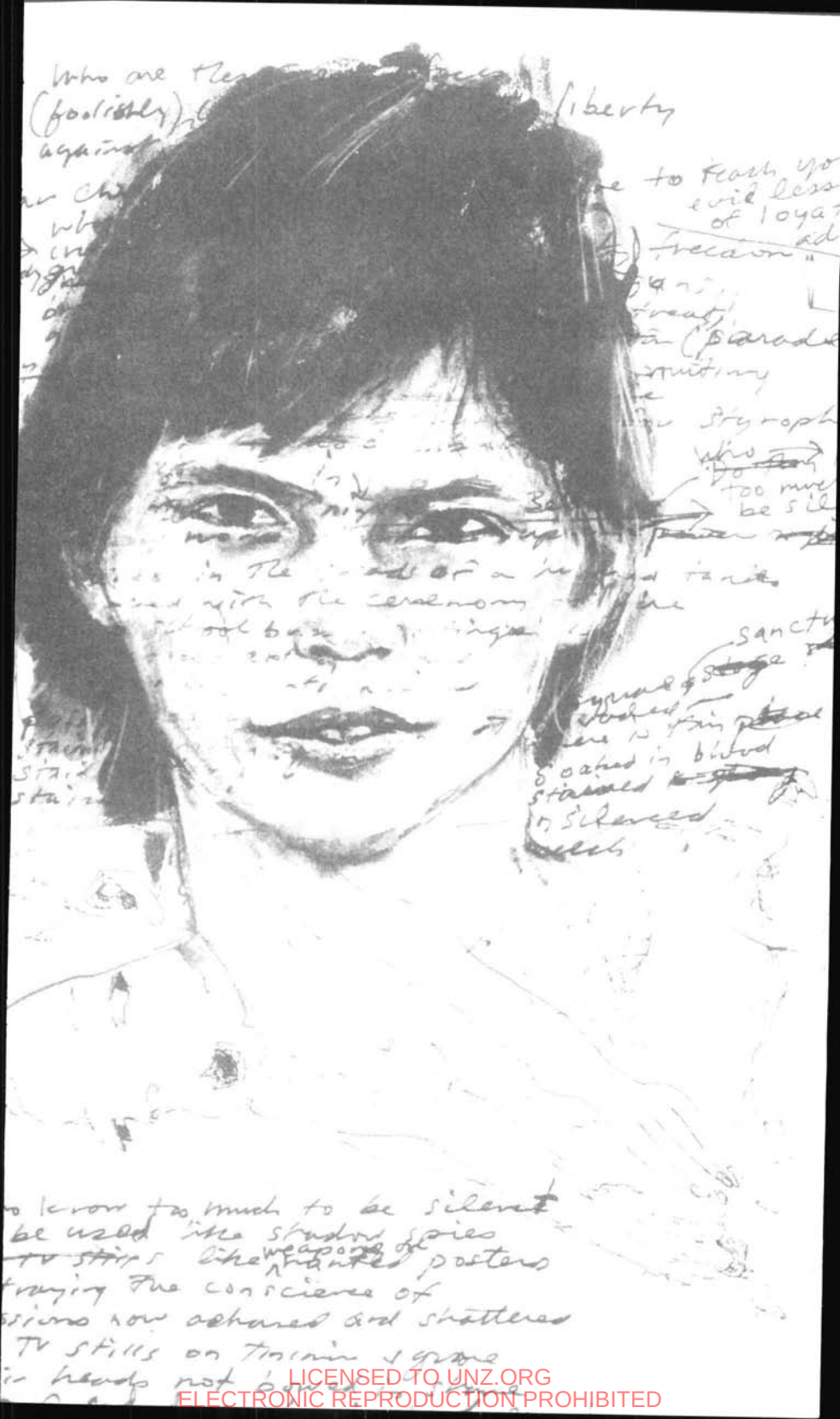

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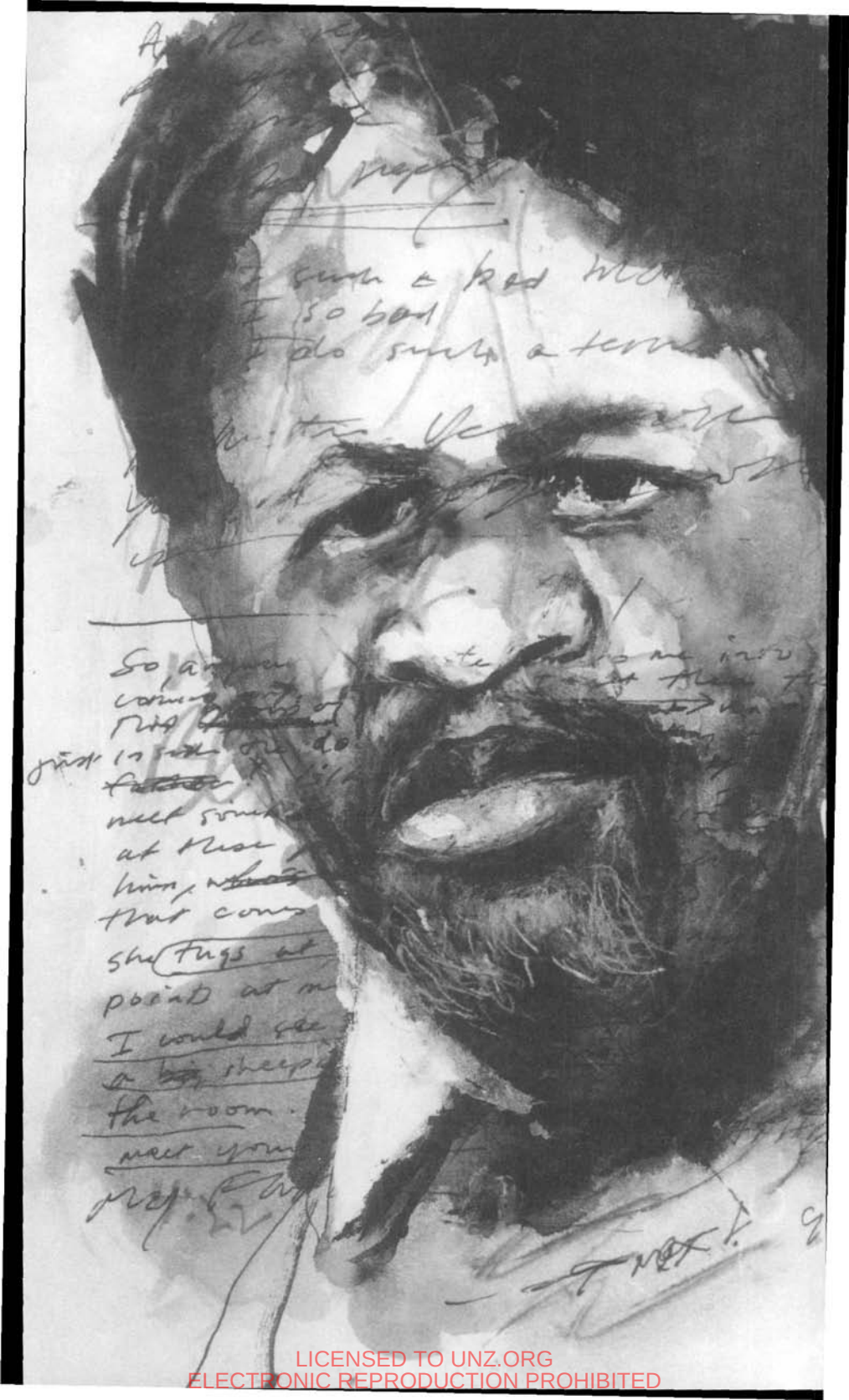

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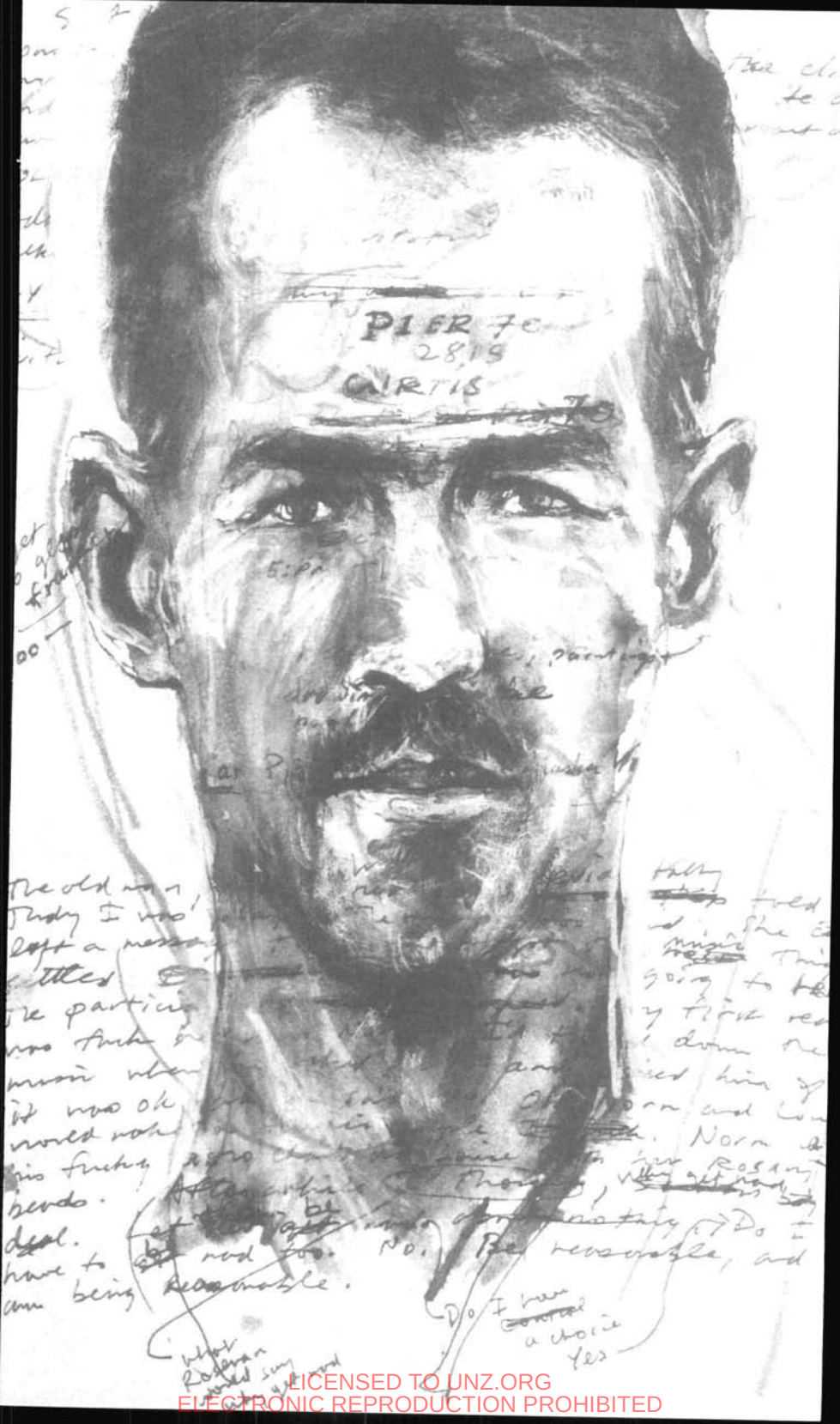

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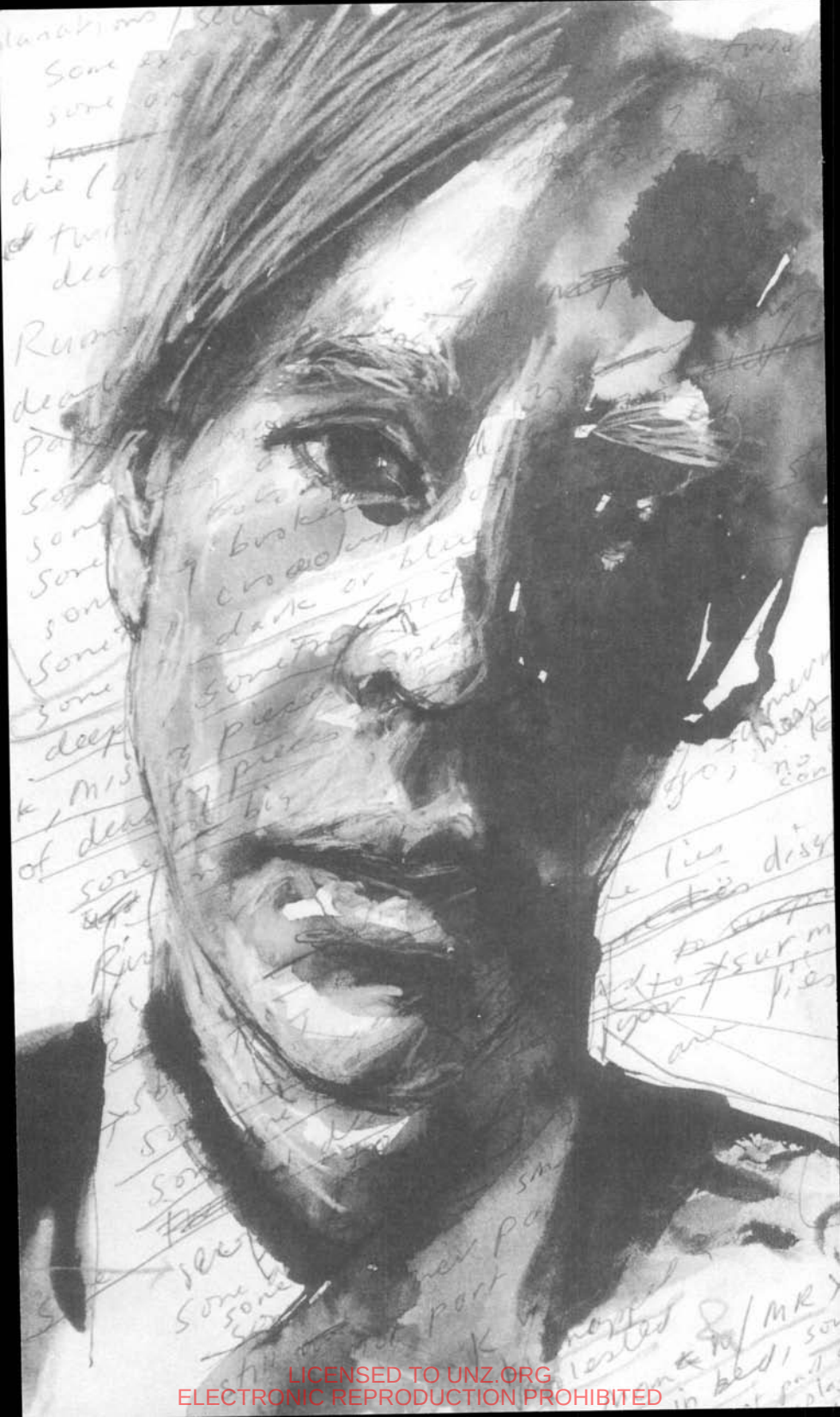

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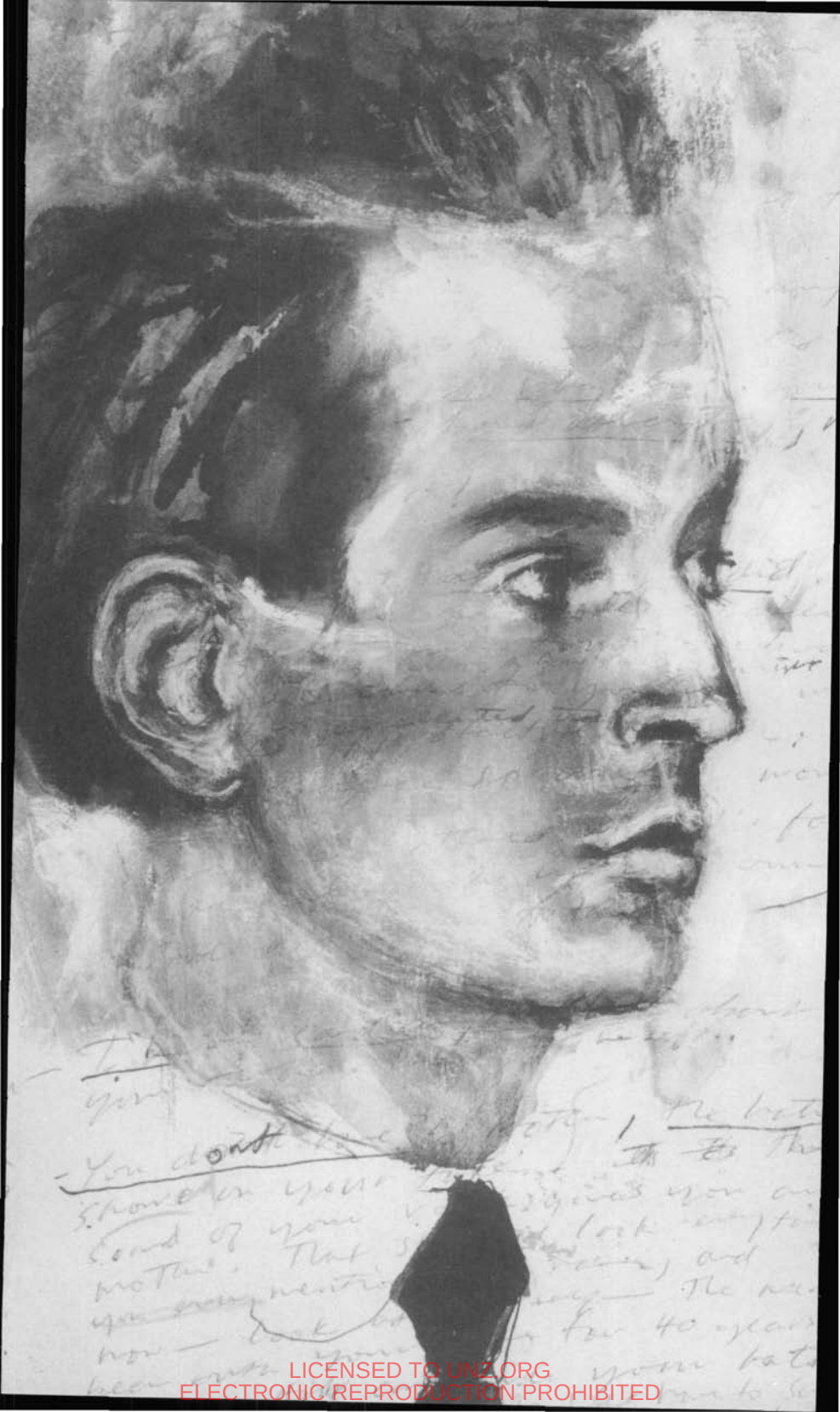

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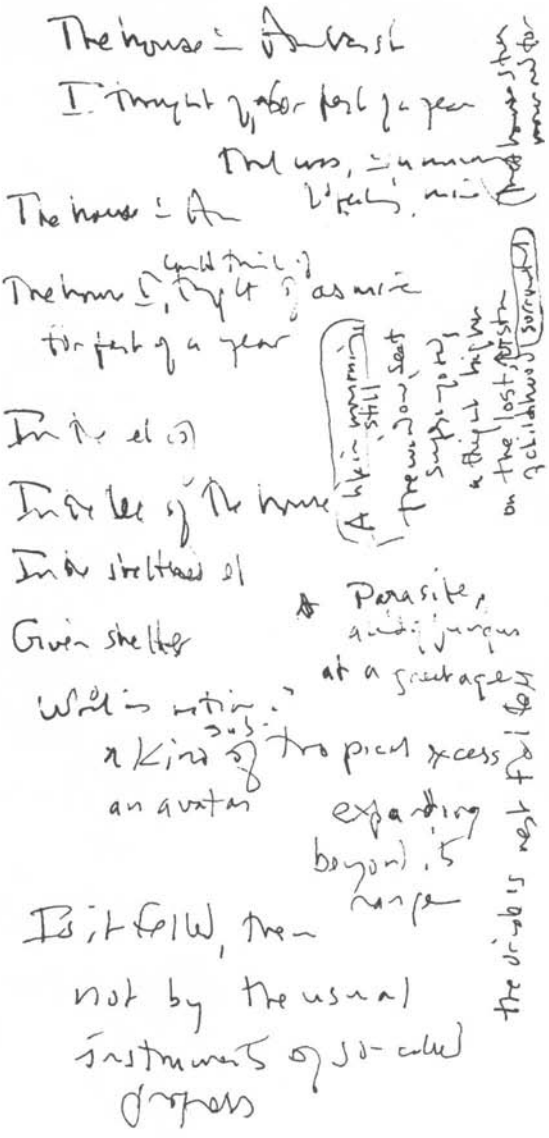

Amy Clampitt's notes for a poem not yet written.

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Amy Clampitt

The Art of Poetry XLV

Amy Clampitt's childhood was spent in the small farming village of her birth, New Providence, Iowa, where, at the age of nine she began to write poetry. Taking a bachelor's degree with honors in English at Grinnell College and a Phi Beta Kappa key as well, Clampitt began graduate study at Columbia University, but left to work for Oxford University Press. In 1951 she spent five months in Europe, returning to work as a reference librarian for the National Audubon Society (1952–1959), free-lance editor and researcher (1960–1977) and editor at E.P. Dutton (1977–1982). Since 1982 she has been a full-time poet, with occasional semesters as a college teacher.

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Her first two books of poetry, Multitudes, Multitudes *(1974) and* The Isthmus *(1981), printed by small presses, attracted little attention. Though her first major book of poetry,* The Kingfisher *(1983), was published less than ten years ago, this poet from the American heartland has become a major voice in contemporary American poetry, respected not only here but in England, where Faber & Faber has followed Knopf in publishing each collection. With each of the books that followed (*What the Light Was Like, *1985;* Archaic Figure, *1987;* Westward, *1990), she has fulfilled the promise Edmund White and others discerned in* The Kingfisher. *Critics laud her for "a brilliant aural imagination" (Joel Connaroe), for an erudition that is impressive, for a linguistic elegance that energizes her verse. Yet what may be most impressive is her passionate articulation of the pain experienced by those victimized and marginalized, whether the nineteenth-century American feminist Margaret Fuller, the Victorian novelist George Eliot or an anonymous Greenwich Village neighbor.*

Today she publishes regularly in the most respected journals and magazines. Few contemporary poets—male or female—occupy such a distinguished place in American letters. She was recently awarded a John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Fellowship, the latest in a series of awards that have included a Lila Wallace Readers Digest Writer's Award, a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship, an American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award and a Rockefeller Foundation Residency at the Villa Serbelloni in Bellagio.

Clampitt's writing extends beyond her own poetry. She has translated cantos from Dante's Inferno *as one of a number of contemporary poets participating in a project designed by Daniel Halpern. She has published a number of essays and reviews, many of them gathered in* Predecessors Et Cetera. *She is presently at work revising a play on Dorothy Wordsworth and her circle, tentatively titled "A Guilty Thing Surprised."*

Clampitt has devoted considerable time to teaching in recent years. She has held appointments as writer-in-residence at the College of William and Mary and at Amherst College; in December 1991 she was Elizabeth Drew Distinguished Pro-

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fessor of English at Smith College where, during the spring term of 1993, she will be the first writer to serve as the Conkling Distinguished Writer-in-Residence. When not holding appointments elsewhere, Clampitt lives in New York City with annual summer holidays taken on the coast of Maine.

The series of conversations that comprise this interview took place in Boston during November 1991 when Clampitt participated in a reading at Boston University and during her appointment at Smith the following month.

INTERVIEWER

You are a product of a place very different from where you now spend most of your time, from where we are right now. You were born and brought up in Iowa, a child of the prairie. How do you see your early experiences in America's heartland? Did you really mean it when you once spoke of yourself as "a misfit from the Midwest"?

AMY CLAMPITT

I was in the middle, and I didn't want to be there. I was conscious of that from as early as I can remember. My own sense was that nothing authentic was there, that everything was derived from somewhere else, and I wanted to get near to where things were derived from. It has something to do with the geographical nature of the region, its being a hollow, a depression. It isn't like Europe, with its mountain barriers and raised places where you can get up and look out, all those edges and coastlines. For some reason I thought it would be more interesting, and that one would be closer to real things, if one was at the edge.

INTERVIEWER

Your poem "Imago" gives us a glimpse of you as a child, "the shirker propped above her book in a farmhouse parlor . . .eyeing at a distance the lit pavilions that seduced her." What was home like?

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CLAMPITT

That image goes back to the first house I remember, a farmhouse parlor I can picture vividly: I used to lie on the rug, propped on my elbows, and read there. One of the books I read was an old copy of Hans Christian Andersen with strange, very nineteenth-century engravings. It was so old that the outer covers were gone. There was some kind of awful fascination about those stories; they're not cheerful, they're a glimpse into the adult world, and I think I was entranced by them for that reason. I think the happiest times in my childhood were spent in solitude—reading such stories. Socially, I was a misfit. I didn't know the right things to say to anybody. I had no confidence that I could prevail in anybody's mind as having anything to say.

What I most enjoyed was the order of the seasons and especially the arrival of spring which, when you are small, comes from a great distance. In the late summer there would be the threshing season, which totally vanished once the combine came in. In those days the grain had to be cut and tied into bundles, and the bundles put into shocks to keep the rain off, and then the day came when the entire community would be involved in bringing in the grain and feeding it into the threshing machine and taking away the threshed grain and stacking the straw. This is something I've written about. The boys in the family would be out bringing water to the men in the fields, the girls involved in the kitchen, cooking a huge meal at noon for all the crew, and this was something you looked forward to. Then at the end of the season there would be what they called the "settling up," when the balances were arrived at—so and so contributed so much labor and so on, and that would take place at somebody's house, and there'd be ice cream for everyone, games of hide-and-seek in the shrubbery outside, that sort of thing. Those are the pleasantest memories. I have some winter memories, too, of riding in a sleigh, of an evening of bobsledding on a steep hill; the whole community turned out. There were a lot of relatives, a lot of cousins, and at Christmas there would usually be a huge family gathering—pleasant in a way, yet I remember being miserable.

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I couldn't deal with all the people who sounded so sure of themselves when I didn't feel sure of anything.

INTERVIEWER

What texts, other than Hans Christian Andersen, became important to you now that you think back?

CLAMPITT

Strange things. Oscar Wilde's *The Birthday of the Infanta.* I read many books at my grandfather's house. My grandfather was the great solace. He didn't have a lot of formal education, but he had a feeling for words and a sense of the past, a sense of being involved in something larger than his own immediate concerns. He subscribed to the Book-of-the-Month Club, and so I remember for instance reading Sigrid Undset's *Kristin Lavransdatter* and Willa Cather's *Shadows on the Rock,* with the Knopf borzoi on the title page. I remember reading the *The Bonney Family* by the Iowa novelist Ruth Suckow. The books I read were not all great classics. I did read the sonnets of Shakespeare quite early. I discovered Keats when his poetry was assigned to me by a teacher in high school. Swinburne and Edna St. Vincent Millay were my favorites before Keats was, actually. I can't give you a list. I met somebody lately who kept a list of everything she read from the time she was twelve. Now that would be an interesting exercise.

INTERVIEWER

If I'm correct, your earliest ambition was to be not a writer, but a painter. Does that take us back to those illustrations in Andersen or to some other place?

CLAMPITT

I vaguely remember my mother subscribed to some art magazines. I have a clear picture of what I thought a painting was: it was of a Madonna and child. When I was eight or nine, I thought that's what I wanted to do, paint old masters.

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INTERVIEWER

What sorts of things did you write when you first started? Were they modeled upon what you read, or were they just sheer invention?

CLAMPITT

I remember writing a poem in which the word *beautiful* appeared. What it was about, I have no idea. I think I knew that I had misspelled *beautiful.* I don't think it was modeled on anything particular. Later when I started writing poetry, mostly I wrote sonnets. They would have been modeled on Shakespeare, I suppose. I also tried to write stories. I had a notion even before I went to college that a career as a writer of fiction was possible. When I graduated from college in 1941, it was really ridiculous to admit to being a poet. Poets were looked upon as figures of fun . . . a kind of threat, really, to the way other people lived. Edna St. Vincent Millay, whom I admired, was a ridiculous figure in a way. So in those days I thought it would be all right to be a novelist, publish something and make a little money. Being a poet was too much to take on.

INTERVIEWER

Philip Larkin comes to mind because he always maintained that he would much rather have been a novelist than a poet. He wrote two novels and had them published, but the third one never really got finished. You wrote a couple of novels, didn't you?

CLAMPITT

I wrote three novels. I can hardly remember them. I don't have any wish even to think about them now. I didn't know how to write a novel. For quite a while, I was really so caught up in just living from day to day that all I wrote were fragments. They had to do with memories of my childhood.

INTERVIEWER

How valuable were your days at Grinnell?

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CLAMPITT

In some ways those four years were a kind of wandering, lost and not knowing what to do with myself. I knew how to get good grades, I could write papers and all that, but I can't say I really learned how to think. The greatest excitement came from a course I took my senior year in the history of art. That for some reason made history real to me in a way that nothing else did. I couldn't envision large public events; I couldn't think the way historians think about armies and troop movements, but to see the buildings that had been left behind was tremendously thrilling.

INTERVIEWER

You once said, "My first visit to England and in particular to Oxford, where for the first time I believed that the past could be experienced as something present, changed my life forever."

CLAMPITT

That was eight years after I graduated from college. I had the good fortune to be entertained in England by people who worked for Oxford University Press. The reason Oxford was especially thrilling was all those towers, that "towery city and branchy between towers," in Hopkins's poem about Duns Scotus's Oxford, were still there. It was that I expected to see and did see. I also remember being taken into Christ Church Hall and smelling the past—all that stone, those centuries of spilled gravy.

INTERVIEWER

In 1978 the late Howard Moss, long time poetry editor of *The New Yorker*, accepted "The Sun Underfoot Among the Sundews" for publication. You had been writing poetry for some time; you'd published one collection, *Multitudes, Multitudes* yourself; but this was "your big break," and so Howard Moss was important to you, wasn't he?

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CLAMPITT

Oh, Howard Moss was very important to me. Having sent things to quite a number of little magazines and getting no response or if any, a very negative one, it meant something to have a figure like that pay attention. But it didn't just happen all of a sudden. I'd been sending things to *The New Yorker* for years. Everybody who writes anything wants *The New Yorker* to publish it.

INTERVIEWER

What kind of relationship did you have with Howard Moss? What kinds of suggestions did he make about your work?

CLAMPITT

He made very few. He would sometimes suggest cutting out a line, usually the last one. We didn't have an extensive correspondence, as some people have. I was devoted to him. He was a lovely man, really rather shy, you know, very appealing. He had no pretense at all. I didn't see a lot of him. I never went to see him at *The New Yorker*; the first time we met was at the Algonquin. The headwaiter didn't recognize him, and I looked so unlike anybody famous that we went down the street instead. Now and then, he came to dinner. We played Mozart. We didn't talk about literature a lot, except in a most general way. They weren't these huge discussions that you imagine go on. I don't know how he did what he did. He had such amazing tact and kindness to so many people, his name was in the phone book; how he dealt with that I never knew. He had a huge social life. He went out all the time; the ballet was his special love. His poetry also has a special quality that is very much him. He was a very funny man. He was someone I revered, and of course I sent him poems. He sent a lot of them back.

INTERVIEWER

Your first major collection, *The Kingfisher*, was published by Knopf in 1983; it was lavishly praised, most particularly by Edmund White, who called it "one of the most brilliant debuts

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in recent American literature." It has now sold over ten thousand copies and remains in print—as do all four of your major collections. Were you overwhelmed by the critical response to *The Kingfisher?*

CLAMPITT

It was very upsetting. I wasn't ready to have that many people, whom I didn't know, know about me. There was some inkling that it was going to do well, but I wasn't prepared for four pages in *The New York Review of Books.* I remember that a friend called up and said, "Well, what does it feel like to have half of New York City hate you?" I thought to myself: you're going to pay—you're going to be sorry. I wasn't ready for it. I didn't believe I deserved it and what I'd seen about writers suddenly successful, especially younger people, really scared me. I think if I'd been younger it would have been much worse, but it was bad enough. I just thought, I've lost my hold on who I am, it's not going to make me happier. I was depressed, and finally I went to a doctor who put me on antidepressants. I hate medicines—I hated taking them. It's very humiliating, you know. I didn't really stop writing, though I think for a little while maybe I did when I was at my most distraught. I'm really not all that unstable, I don't think, it's just that I wasn't ready to deal with the change in the way I perceived myself, and that I perceived other people perceiving me.

INTERVIEWER

You've been able to move through and beyond all of that, haven't you?

CLAMPITT

Well, it doesn't bother me so much. Of course if you get that much positive attention you're bound to get a fair amount of negative attention, and I don't much enjoy that. One learns to be philosophical. One learns to discount a whole lot of stuff. If you can't discount praise, then you're in for a lot of trouble. I've tended to discount everything, and the longer I live, the

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more I discount it. It's the only way to keep your wits, really, and not just be torn to shreds by being noticed or not noticed.

INTERVIEWER

Let me shift gears to the more mundane level for a minute and ask some of the typical *Paris Review* questions. Do you have a favorite place and time for writing? Do you need to retreat or withdraw into silence?

CLAMPITT

My favorite place for writing, the place where I'm most likely to get something written, is the coast of Maine, where I've spent some time—never more than six weeks at a stretch, usually less—nearly every summer since 1974. I find a place to put my typewriter where I can look at the water. I tend to work best in the morning—I'm not a night person, although I have occasionally woken up with a phrase in my head and not been able to sleep. I used to keep something to write with under the pillow just in case something like that came to me—sometimes it was very hard to decipher because I don't like to turn the light on. I'm not an obsessive writer at all. I know of people who say that they write every day—I don't. I wish I were that organized, but I'm not. There are times when there are other things I have to do. I need some time when I'm not going to be interrupted. I can sometimes write through interruptions, but that's because I've sort of set myself in that mode. I'm very erratic about it.

INTERVIEWER

Do you write in longhand or prefer to use a typewriter or word processor of some sort?

CLAMPITT

I almost invariably begin a poem in longhand and often do several drafts that way before typing it up. But I'm lost without a typewriter. Currently I have an Olivetti portable (ordered by mail from the Vermont Country Store), which replaces the Olympia I'd used for several years that finally broke down

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forever. I'm totally ignorant of word processors and how they function; even an IBM Selectric is capable of far more things than I know how to tell it to do.

INTERVIEWER

What is the process of writing a poem like for you? That involves us in a discussion of inspiration, doesn't it? I suppose the Muses come quickly and inevitably to mind, and so does Auden's famous line about Yeats, "Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry."

CLAMPITT

I don't feel comfortable with any of that language. It never would have occurred to me to say I'd been hurt into poetry. I don't feel comfortable speaking of inspiration either. It's more like a small bubbling thing, the spring the Muses have always been associated with—only interior and very small. And usually there is some sense of connection to be made, distance bridged: something like that.

INTERVIEWER

Do you work by finishing the first line before you go on to the second line of a poem?

CLAMPITT

No, I don't anymore. It seems to me, looking back on my earlier efforts to write a fairly sustained poem that I did that. I would sit down and write line-by-line, and then the next day I'd get up and start all over again, copying out and maybe making changes, but now it's much more—I don't know the word to use for it—hit or miss. I get these glancing impressions of something, and I think my aim usually is to get to the end as fast as possible, so as to have some idea of the shape of the whole, and then I go back to winnow and rework. But of course sometimes you don't know where the end is, and a lot of the time it doesn't come to anything anyhow. So then it would be a kind of mad dash rather than deliberate effort to get it just

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right. That can vary; sometimes you can get stuck on one line and keep going over and over it and get no further.

INTERVIEWER

There's not all that great blank space of a legal-sized page confronting you, and there's certainly not a computer screen there, all blank.

CLAMPITT

Oh, the thought of it! I don't understand how, but a lot of poets do relish computers. My own original handwritten drafts are usually on the backs of those silly announcements law firms send out, that so-and-so has just been appointed a partner, which would otherwise go into the wastebasket, and which my best friend Hal, a law professor, saves for me. They're printed on fine creamy vellum, and they're very small—four-by-six inches or so, though maddeningly there isn't even a standard size. I've put away stacks of these things for a single poem. Here, let me show you—three beginnings of the same poem, going nowhere.

INTERVIEWER

That is precisely what I wanted to ask you next—how many versions might be needed before you're satisfied with what you've written?

CLAMPITT

Oh, oh, it's endless. As one who keeps every illegible scrap in the way of drafts and reworkings, I'm appalled at the amount of paper that gets used that way. I suppose it's not unusual for me to retype a poem, after it's been fiddled with and worked over in longhand, as many as twenty-six times. You may think you have a final version, only to have second and third and twenty-third thoughts along the way. It's not that I'm necessarily satisfied at the end of all this; I just don't know what to do next.

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INTERVIEWER

As poems "emerge," if that is an appropriate term, are you conscious of the extent to which they have a discernible line of development and movement?

CLAMPITT

That is something I can't generalize about. Sometimes I think I see a shape, a development of some sort, from the beginning; but often something quite different emerges—yes, that's a term I'd subscribe to. I'm generally conscious of connections and recurrences—themes, images, words that crop up, often seemingly out of nowhere. It's not easy to make any useful generalization about what goes on.

INTERVIEWER

At what point do you give what you've written to someone else to read, and who might that reader be?

CLAMPITT

Well, it's always Hal, who's been very nice about listening when I think I've got something. When I've got it typed up the first time, if he's not deep in something else, then I read it to him. The process of reading it aloud is important in itself, but I can't read it to myself. I need an audience; he's very obliging and will let me know how far I am from having something to say that will do. I remember one time he said, "That's the worst thing I ever heard."

INTERVIEWER

That's a lovely expression, knowing when there is "something to say that will do."

CLAMPITT

That notion of Paul Valéry's that no piece of writing is ever finished, only abandoned—well, I think that's the way I feel most of the time.

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INTERVIEWER

In a recent article in *The New Republic*, Jacob Weisberg took editors to task for shirking their responsibilities, doing little if any work on manuscripts submitted to them, particularly when the writer has an acknowledged reputation. He complains about editors who no longer do anything at all except take the work wholesale and worry about "the bottom line." As a former editor yourself, you must have a rather developed notion of what an editor should and should not do. What does your editor do for you?

CLAMPITT

Well it's true, they have accountants breathing down their necks. They don't have time to do it. I feel for them. When I was working as a free lance, there were some really good line editors, really serious about getting into the skin of the writer and trying to be helpful. I have one friend who still does that, Phoebe Hoss at Basic Books. She's well known for what she does. The most famous of those editors—she's of a slightly older generation—is Catharine Carver, who lives in England. Any number of people have paid tribute to her skills. But there are almost none of those editors left. It's partly economics—publishers feel they can't afford to have somebody there whose purpose is to make the manuscript better. There are free-lance editors around, but I'm afraid a lot of them don't know what they're doing. I wouldn't be able to do it anymore, because of the computer's having come into its own. I would have to master computers now in order to be an editor, and I have no intention of doing any such thing.

Whether there is much that any editor can do with a poetry manuscript I'm not sure. I'm about as prickly as anybody when it comes to having my lines rewritten for me, where verse is concerned. One may cringe momentarily on being queried, but if the query is valid, one swallows hard and takes account of it. The same is true of those checkers at *The New Yorker;* now and then they do catch something, though a lot of what they come up with is irrelevant and wrongheaded. What copy editors do is partly showing how much they know. As an editor

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I worked largely with trade nonfiction, in which it isn't so much a matter of craft as of clarity that is asked for; most writers of nonfiction don't seem to mind having their texts tidied up and perhaps made a bit more coherent by a zealous editor. But zealous editors, of the kind I guess I was, seem to be about to vanish.

INTERVIEWER

From your earliest published work, the spiritual dimension has been important. How does this concern figure in your present work and, particularly, your latest collection, *Westward*?

CLAMPITT

At the time I wrote that poem "The Eve of All Souls" I would have described myself as a Christian believer, more or less. Since I wrote it, whatever dogmatic certitude I had then has pretty much evaporated. I find, in fact, that dogmatic certitude more and more troubles me. What I see in Christianity now is a kind of template of human nature—by which I guess I mean mainly human suffering, that I find undeniable—without any dogmatic certitude. And I have this notion, which may be more a convenient fiction than an actual belief, about Jerusalem (where I've never been) as a fixed center, a source of value. And thinking about the westward movement, which I see more and more as defining us, was bound to bring into focus the notion of a departure and a portage from that source.

INTERVIEWER

In an age somewhat given to a singular lack of form, to self-derived notions of free verse, and what can only be described as a tin ear, could you speak about the importance of these two aspects of poetry: the form and verse itself?

CLAMPITT

I've given a good deal of thought to the question of form just lately, but without arriving at any real conclusion. I like

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to think I have an ear for language, and certainly I write for the ear; so it would seem to be that melody and rhythm keep a poem going for me rather than anything identifiable as a form. Most of what I write has neither a noticeable rhyme scheme nor a metrical one; what I write has to be called free verse. The stanza forms I arrive at more often than not are a matter of looking neat on the page—and, not incidentally, a means of curbing my natural verbosity. But they're hardly the equivalent of the formal rigor you find in Homeric Greek or the French of Racine or the blank verse of Milton or the unmistakable rhyme schemes in the odes of Keats. For me, I suppose Hopkins is the real enabler—though Coleridge before him had opened the way, and so, of course, had Whitman. Lately, I've been more conscious of the example of Whitman than anyone else. I've begun to be uneasy about those tight little patterns on the page—though I go on producing them.

INTERVIEWER

Your dissatisfaction with some poetry in this regard has led you to say about a particular poem, "the music is a vibration in the brain rather than in the ear." And that certainly puts you in good company, doesn't it, for Frost's notion that "the ear is the only true writer and the only true reader" comes to mind.

CLAMPITT

Taking note of that, I've been thinking lately of what's happened over the centuries as an evolution away from the persistence and predominance of aural memory. The strong meter, as well as the recurring epithets that tie the *Iliad* together, would have been a necessity when few if any could read, and poetry was handed down orally, from composer to auditor and from generation to generation. Hardly anyone memorizes poetry anymore. There used to be illiterate people, I gather, who knew reams of the Bible by heart. That kind of illiteracy is now rare. And as aural memory ceased to be essential, the character of poetic composition was bound to change, and so the music that vibrates solely in the brain, all but

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bypassing the sound of the speaking voice, became inevitably something somebody was going to explore.

INTERVIEWER

Is poetic form important to you in other ways, say as homage or as participation in a tradition?

CLAMPITT

As homage. A couple of years ago I wrote an elegy—or a sort of elegy; it's also, on a certain level, a political poem—that began by evoking Keats at Winchester, where he wrote the "Ode to Autumn." It's in unrhymed stanzas of eleven lines, with indentations that follow those in the "Ode." It's called "'Eighty-Nine." I had a lot of trouble with it and can't but have doubts about whether it succeeds so far as the form is concerned. It does succeed with audiences, because among the subjects are events everybody knows about. I suppose it's wanting to think of myself as belonging to a tradition that's at work here. As for elegy as form—I think of it, I guess, more as a genre. There can be free-verse elegies; I've written more than one myself. Most lately, I've been teased by the notion of finding some way to do homage to the eclogues and *Georgics* of Vergil; but that's because they deal with a theme that interests me: the contrasts between rural life, and one's notions of that life, and life in the city.

INTERVIEWER

Hoping that I do not betray ignorance, have you ever written a sestina? I don't know why that form intrigues me so much, perhaps because of Bishop, Hecht, Swinburne—poets particularly important for you, aren't they?

CLAMPITT

Have I ever written a sestina? Well, not quite. The truth is, I've come to abhor the very thought of another sestina. Lots and lots of them are being written, and nine tenths of the ones I've seen are wooden, mechanical, repetitious and dull. Unlike the sonnet, which urges compression, the sestina seems to

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sanction drawing things out interminably. The whole notion of its being a musical form seems to have been lost sight, or rather hearing, of. But two poems of mine, "The Reedbeds of the Hackensack" in *What the Light was Like* and "Olympia" in *Archaic Figure,* were actually composed under the impression that I was writing a sestina, only shorn of the envoi. I didn't have a handbook with me, and when I realized that I hadn't arranged the final words according to the classical sequence, I decided I couldn't be bothered. I still haven't got that sequence through my head; the one I followed was much neater. In any event, I wasn't trying to do homage to anybody. I knew Elizabeth Bishop's sestinas, but they weren't my favorites among her poems. At the time I hadn't even read Anthony Hecht's "Sestina d'Inverno," which I really love. I wasn't aware that Swinburne had even written any. I decided to try the form because I had a lot of unwieldy notions that I thought I might be able to pull together that way. "Olympia" took off, as I remember, after I had my pocket picked, and it occurred to me that "pickpocket" as a teleuton would be a challenge. The dexterity of the pickpocket, which I had to admire even as it enraged me, somehow suggested the dexterity of Mozart—and so on.

INTERVIEWER

It seems quite clear that you agree with Wallace Stevens that the worst poverty is not to live in a physical world. I wonder if you might speak about the relevance of that notion to both subject and form for your own poetry?

CLAMPITT

Possibly—just possibly—this is where a kind of residual Christianity comes in. I had occasion to think about that assertion of Stevens's, which I suppose I do bring up fairly often, in connection with Dante. His images are so marvelously *there,* even when they're quite imaginary; I'm thinking of those leafy, green-winged guardian angels in the *Purgatorio*, the coolness and freshness of them, *verde come fogliette.* But Dante couldn't have subscribed exactly, he couldn't have agreed with

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Stevens, because as a Christian he subscribed to a reality more real than the tangible one—the basis of Christianity being incarnation, the here-and-now embodiment of a more-than-tangible reality. *The Divine Comedy* would be tedious, it would be something of a bore, without the intense physicality Dante brought to it throughout—though one has to admit that for all the verve that runs through his vision of Paradise, it's hard not to regret the freshness of those green wings. I think one misses even that little swish, the *mala striscia* of the snake in the grass the guardian angels are on guard against. To go back to what Stevens said: Yes. What attracted me immediately to the poems of Keats, and later of Hopkins, is the way they draw on and evoke physical sensation in all its luscious variety. I have to add that as one gets older, that freshness isn't so accessible, so available as it once was, either as a subject or as an experience in itself.

INTERVIEWER

Marianne Moore praised the poetry of Thomas Hardy for what she called its "intense particularity," a quality your work shares with both of these poets'. How important is detail to your work?

CLAMPITT

Particularity of detail is certainly something I admire in the work of Marianne Moore—not only admire but am conscious of having drawn on as an example. I think that sometimes rather dry particularity of hers did to some extent curb my own rhetorical tendencies—and those are tendencies that come before any conscious effort at precision. I've been somewhat misrepresented where the influence of Marianne Moore is concerned—I mean, the tendency amounts to a kind of late accretion as compared to the patterns of sound and syntax that seem always to have been lurking there—the way I hear language, and that could be looked on (I guess have been) as a kind of regression.

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INTERVIEWER

In trying to discern a qualitative distinction between the work of male and female poets, it was Elizabeth Hardwick who suggested, "perhaps this greed for particulars is the true mark of the poetry of women of our time." To what extent are you conscious of yourself as a "female poet"?

CLAMPITT

Though I've quoted it, I'm not sure I know just what Elizabeth Hardwick meant by that "greed for particulars." Anyhow, a certain attention to detail is a trait I do associate with women—the kind of almost myopic care that goes into dressmaking, patchwork quilts, embroidering, gardening in and out of doors. The poetry of at least some women does seem to embody that kind of attention—to knowing the names of fabrics and stitches, of exotic plants, seasonings, herbs and spices, pigments and so on. Knowing the names of things, certain particular kinds of things, discovering new categories of naming—that's something all poets have in common, only each poet will have her or his own particular vocabulary, a constellation of meanings and distinctions and gradations. Think of all the words that came into existence with the invention of ballet. The world is brimming over with vocabularies of that kind. It's filling up with words. When you think of language in that way, I can't see that knowing particulars has anything to do with gender. The act of naming is in no way a female prerogative or preoccupation. This being so, I don't really think of myself as a female poet. Women are going to write differently from men, simply because the experience they start with is fundamentally, physiologically different; but if to be a "female poet" means to address oneself consciously and exclusively to exploring that fundamental difference, and/or to do so for a primarily female audience, I'm clearly not one. And just as clearly, I guess, lines are going to be drawn, have been drawn, in the minds of many readers—lines of distinction between this one and that one. And if the distinction is made, it is going to matter. There's no denying that.

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INTERVIEWER

Right from your first major collection, the female condition and experience has been of considerable importance—what you yourself have called "the whole trajectory of being female." Perhaps this is one of the structures you've been trying to redefine, at least from "Rain at Bellagio" on?

CLAMPITT

I do seem to recall that the idea of a collection of poems having to do in some way with the lives of women was already there at the time I put together *The Kingfisher*. But if I remember correctly, the starting point was a fascination with Medusa. A fascination with myth was where it all began, rather than with interpreting my own or my contemporaries' experience. "Rain at Bellagio," though, wasn't consciously about female experience; it just happened to be a thing that seemed worth writing about. So far as categories are concerned, it was a water poem. I'd already written a big fire poem, "The Dahlia Gardens"; and it may have been a conversation with Howard Moss the first time I met him—the only really extended conversation I ever had with him about my own work—that first suggested it: the idea of a big water poem to balance "The Dahlia Gardens." But other poems from around that time, and earlier, did have to do with the experience of women. There was one that hasn't been collected—"Eleusis" was the title, if I remember right—about the experience of sharing a hospital room with three other women, one of whom really grabbed my imagination; it ended up being about Demeter and Kore. Oh yes, and even before that, among the poems in *Multitudes, Multitudes*—that little privately printed collection—there is one about the island of Naxos, invoking Ariadne as a kind of private deity. Another poem, a really quite nasty one called "Models," has to do with women—and with a vengeance. It dates back to 1971 and came out of some pretty disillusioning encounters with the feminist movement during a wildly militant phase.

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INTERVIEWER

Well, would you describe yourself as a feminist poet?

CLAMPITT

If asked, "Are you a feminist, yes or no," I would have to answer yes. But my very early experience with militant women, as I've suggested, was enough to put me off wanting ever to be thought of as a "feminist poet." I suppose all this is a part of the drawing of lines I mentioned a minute ago.

INTERVIEWER

Are there characteristics that would identify poetry as being by a woman rather than a man?

CLAMPITT

Women who are inclined to write poetry at all are inspired by being mad at something. It doesn't affect them in an obvious way but I suspect it's there. You can't help but be affected.

INTERVIEWER

Is that a common impulse, creating poetry from anger?

CLAMPITT

Rage? Yes, I think so. Everybody has to write out of rage sometimes.

INTERVIEWER

And that affects women more than men?

CLAMPITT

I think so nowadays. Women have been given reason to recognize a lot of things that have been covered up for a long time. What preceded the rage was a lot of anxiety. When you get over the anxiety you discover you should have been mad a long time ago. Women are full of steam, and mostly they're making a lot of noise. I don't necessarily like it, but some very plausible stuff is being written by women in a way that most men are not doing. . . . But there is also a kind of poetry being

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written now that doesn't derive from feeling. Rather it comes out of a notion that it's time to turn over a couple of ideas in your head that have to be sorted out. These are often quiet books with nuances in them you have to listen for. For example, John Ashbery. He refuses to raise his voice; many poets have fashioned their work from him. He finds new tunes because he has a wonderful ear. He has so much to say . . . all these almost undetectable references. Since he gets a lot of attention, many poets are going to fashion their work on his. This kind of thing can be dull in the wrong hands—the distinction needs to be made between dull books and quiet books.

INTERVIEWER

You mentioned poets who make a lot of noise. Is "rap" in this category?

CLAMPITT

I'd like to like rap, but it's too loud. It's one thing to get something out of your system, but not when it interferes with other people's hearing.

INTERVIEWER

You seem to have a consuming interest in neglected dimensions of life, whether plant or animal or human. One of the most affecting examples of that concern is "A Hedge of Rubber Trees" in *Westward*.

CLAMPITT

"A Hedge of Rubber Trees" is a poem I'd been trying to write for years—along with "A Winter Burial" and "A Whippoorwill in the Woods," which are also in *Westward*. They're about particular women, little biographies really, or anyhow that was the way I originally conceived of them. It's a form that goes back to the time of *Multitudes, Multitudes*. The lives of marginal, overlooked and neglected women have a kind of analogue in growing things—the weeds that spring up in vacant lots and are the precise opposite of the showy, carefully cultivated blooms in a florist's window. They have an analogue

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as well with the city pigeons I seem to go on writing about. Survivors. Nobody encourages them, many people find them an annoyance; but there they still are.

INTERVIEWER

In your recent essay, "Predecessors, Et Cetera," you begin by asking a question, "What do you need to know to be a writer?" And you answer, "In one word, I'd say, predecessors . . . There is less originality than we think. There is also a vast amount of solitude. Writers need company. We all need it. It's not the command of knowledge that matters finally, but the company. It's the predecessors. As a writer, I don't know where I'd be without them." What predecessors matter most to you and why?

CLAMPITT

The question about what a writer needs to know is not one I asked myself. It was assigned, when I went back to Grinnell, my old college, for a writers' symposium along with three other graduates who'd published books. The question seemed to me a bit silly, or anyhow irrelevant, for a poet, and I was simply doing my best to go along with the program. As for naming names, or giving homage to the predecessors I'd declared indispensable, I was bound to mention Hopkins, whom I'm conscious of revering more than any other. After him I'd name Virginia Woolf, John Keats, Shakespeare, Milton, maybe Proust. After that, the list could vary from day to day, even hour to hour. Hopkins comes first because I simply can't imagine having become a poet without having read his work—the delight in all things physical, the wallowing in sheer sound, in the extravagance of the possibilities of language. For me there is still nobody like him, though Keats comes close, for similar reasons. Reading Virginia Woolf for the first time I thought, "She's writing for me." The book was *The Waves*. I don't feel quite so strongly about it on rereading; but the diaries are something else, as are the letters and the essays. I began reading Proust while I was still in college, before I got around to either George Eliot or Henry James—both of whom

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have tended to mean more to me since—and the sense of discovery I felt, all that lingering over the hawthorns, Marcel having to inform the person he'd been, over and over, that Albertine is gone—the sense of discovery at the time was simply enormous. Now that I think of it, another, totally different writer who gave me that feeling of momentousness was Thoreau. As for Shakespeare, it was the sonnets I can't imagine having been without. As for Milton, what I really mean is "Lycidas."

INTERVIEWER

What contemporaries matter most to you?

CLAMPITT

Among writers more clearly contemporary, there are Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop. Greatly indebted as I am to them both, in my own consciousness they figure as latecomers. I was greatly affected by Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* when it first appeared, and likewise the work of Adrienne Rich, especially *Diving into the Wreck* and her latest book, *An Atlas of the Difficult World.* But any list of the contemporary poets I've admired and been influenced by would go on and on. I hope I can be excused from trying to produce one.

INTERVIEWER

Is there a test for greatness concerning literature so far as you are concerned? Who has passed with flying colors?

CLAMPITT

It could be that the sheer quantity of poetry being published these days makes it harder to think in terms of rank. It is rather as though the very possibility of greatness, whatever it is, had somehow been called into question. Among living figures my idea of a great poet is Czeslaw Milosz. He seems to tower in a way nobody else does. Perhaps it's that he's a bit forbidding, to a degree most famous writers aren't, these days. I'm just now reading *Les misérables* for the first time. Now there is a great book! Dickens's novels, powerful as they are in their way,

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seem juvenile by comparison; and Henry James, whom I can't imagine living without, seems lightweight. George Eliot, enormous as her sympathies are, just doesn't approach the comprehensiveness, the serene mastery and, at the same time, the unrelenting outrage that Victor Hugo had to draw upon. Milosz seems to me to have something like that range. Pretensions to largeness of any sort are a thing we've all become wary of. So no wonder there are all sorts of strategies of avoidance: speaking in a whisper behind masks, from the obliquest of satiric angles, as Charles Bernstein does in a recent poem consisting almost entirely of junk-mail come-ons and psychobabble. It's not egalitarianism so much as mistrust of large gestures that ends up with these strategies. They can be pretty paralyzing, I'm afraid, and they do guarantee that poetry is going to be in the minor mode.

INTERVIEWER

The whole question of the relationship of the poet to the public is something I'd like to ask you about. Do you sense a tension between the private and public dimensions of your art? Perhaps you may not feel any tension at all. Flannery O'Connor once said that, "Art is not anything that goes on 'among' people. . . . It is something that one experiences *alone* for the purpose of realizing in a fresh way, through the senses, the mystery of existence."

CLAMPITT

The tension must surely be there. Perhaps it was manifesting itself in the impatience I've recently felt with those tight little patterns on the page, and the concurrent urge toward a larger, more expansive line, in the manner of Whitman. If you write in that discursive way, you're almost sure to be less cryptic, and thus perhaps more public, in what you say. Since I live in New York City and read the newspapers, it's hardly surprising that some things I write about should have to do with subjects from the common domain, rather than from some recess of memory or an obscure book I've come across. But just how far these

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excursions into the domain of the recognizable really take one toward speaking to a wider audience, I'm not at all sure.

INTERVIEWER

Within the last five years there's been renewed debate about the situation of poetry in the United States, with most writers asserting that there's widespread neglect of poetry. Joseph Epstein in *Commentary*, blamed the poets, saying they simply don't write as well as those modernist poets of the early twentieth century and that their teaching in universities has made their writing academic and obscure. Donald Hall's rebuttal in *Harper's* noted impressive sales figures for some poets' work and a burgeoning of readings by poets. Then Dana Gioia sided with Epstein in *The Atlantic*: while accepting Hall's observations, he pointed out that those readings were largely on college campuses, where university writing programs have created a "subculture" of poet/teachers who service each other; he notes that, "like subsidised farming that grows food no one wants, a poetry industry has been created to serve the interests of the producers and not the consumers." What is your own view of the state of poetry today?

CLAMPITT

The debate you speak of is one I've followed without quite knowing whose side to take. I mean, I tend to agree with everybody. Poetry does seem to become increasingly marginal the more it becomes institutionalized as a livelihood. More and more people do seem to turn up at poetry readings and not just on college campuses either: there is a subculture of amateur poets who make their living some other way, but are driven to write (I think) in reaction to the growing inanity, and ubiquity, of popular culture. I myself take these amateurs seriously. They write better, as a rule, than their counterparts did a century ago—or anyhow the means at their disposal have grown more sophisticated. So I don't think Dana Gioia and Joseph Epstein are entirely right, and on the other hand, I don't quite share Donald Hall's seeming optimism where the general public is concerned. The gulf I see between those

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for whom what's to be found in books and nowhere else is indispensable, and those (many of them ostensibly well educated) for whom it means nothing much, is simply too vast. And it is a gulf that appears to be widening. What's wrong is something far more troubling than any question of whether an M.F.A. in creative writing is a good thing or not.

INTERVIEWER

Louis Simpson has said that students enter "creative writing" programs thinking that "they will be made into writers" simply by virtue of exposure to comments from the poet/teacher and fellow students; evidently his experience has not been particularly happy, to judge from his statements that his students were "amazingly ignorant," "blown about by every wave of fashion" and learning absolutely nothing about forms of verse or meter.

CLAMPITT

My experience as an academic visitor has been generally happy. I have to say, though, that what I've enjoyed least have been the writing courses. Most (not all, but more than not) of my students have been largely ignorant of prosody, some invincibly so. Those are the ones I can't unpersuade of the notion that any spontaneous jotting is *ipso facto* a poem. Even some very good students have turned out to be unfamiliar with the King James Bible. That was a shock. I've made it my business to acquaint my classes with poetry I admire. But in any writing course the exemplars are going to be subsidiary to the writing. I have insisted on some writing in rhyme and meter; it's the least I can do. I much prefer teaching literature for itself, and I think the best graduate writing programs are the ones that lead to an M.A. rather than an M.F.A. Certainly there are some very serious people taking those programs. It would seem, thus far, that the product they turn out is a fairly standard and conventional one, but the entire development is too new for anybody to be sure what it means and where it might lead. The idea of a school of poets is, I believe, fairly ancient. As for the winds of fashion that Louis Simpson com-

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plains of, they've been blowing through literary society for as long as there has been such a thing; you have only to read the satires of John Donne to be reminded of that.

INTERVIEWER

Certainly this brings into focus the whole question of the poet and the public: Simpson has recently said that "it doesn't matter in the least if a poet sells thirty thousand copies of a book or a hundred copies"; what does matter "is in the book and how well it is written," and "the relationship of the poetry to the public is a matter for historians of culture to ponder—it is of no real concern to the poet or to lovers of poetry."

CLAMPITT

The question of a general audience for poetry does puzzle me. I've thought about it lately in connection with Edna St. Vincent Millay, who was a favorite of mine when I was fifteen or so, and who goes on being read by people outside academia but is generally ignored within it. Something about her even now seems to correspond to the notion of what a poet is really, or even ought to be like. I think she's now about to be given another look because she wrote as a woman, as a kind of forerunner of Anne Sexton.

INTERVIEWER

If you feel it important that poetry reach a wider audience, how might that end be accomplished, so far as you are concerned? Joseph Brodsky has suggested that poetry be sold in affordable paperback editions at the checkout counters in supermarkets.

CLAMPITT

I've just been pondering an essay by Charles Bernstein (in that collection put together by James McCorkle, *Conversant Essays*), who takes his cue from Gertrude Stein to argue against there being any middle ground, any center for poets who would appeal to a general public to stand on. He sees only what he calls "the hegemony of homogenizing processes." The

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reason he gives is worth thinking about. He says, "The possibly good intentions of one art for all—and the related agenda of clarity, plainness, accessibility . . . tend to merge with oligarchic marketing imperatives. . . ." He regards the subgroups, ethnic, racial, class, sectional, regional, for whom many poets now write as inevitable, and thus to be encouraged rather than deplored. In this I suppose he would come down on the side of Louis Simpson to the effect that the number of copies a book sells is irrelevant. Whether an audience can be widened by any sort of conscious effort, I certainly don't know. One example I'm aware of is the poetry video magazine, called *Off the Page,* which is the brainchild of an actor, Norman Rose, who happens to love poetry. I found it entertaining. But it costs something like thirty dollars. Who's buying it I have no idea. So far as my own efforts are concerned, all I can think of doing is to be as clear as I possibly can—but I'm afraid that intention doesn't take me very much nearer a mass audience.

INTERVIEWER

Some say that we have no longer fierce and fearless critics of contemporary verse of the Randall Jarrell or Ezra Pound stripe, who did not hesitate to deride, mock, scorn, lampoon, excoriate those poets who failed to come up to their measure. What should good criticism do?

CLAMPITT

This is a subject I don't feel qualified to speak about. I'm not myself a critic, in the sense that I'm out to set a standard, establish a canon, tell people what they ought to read and what to think about it. On the contrary. The kind of assignment I tend to take on, not without hesitation, is one that does no more than explore what is going on in the work of a particular writer, what makes it distinctive, what kind of person is behind it. Just lately I've found myself introducing poets who are about to read their work to an audience. Sometimes they're people who have always baffled me, the most recent being Clark Coolidge. I was lucky enough to stumble onto one self-defining quotation, or I might have given up in despair—he

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being a poet not given to self-definition or accessibility. All one can really hope for is to be of some help to those who are about to listen. That's something I enjoy. For me it's educational. When it comes to formal reviewing, I've tended to demur since I don't feel equipped to pass judgment. It's partly that I'm just not tough enough; I know what it feels like to be the target of a negative assessment, and that makes me reluctant to inflict pain of any sort . . . especially when I'm not convinced that my own judgments are definitive. Admitting to this kind of diffidence is the only way I can proceed at all, sometimes. I was intrigued by the challenge of writing about Edna St. Vincent Millay, though I had no notion in advance of what there was to be said about her by way a centenary observance; and I was still at sea until it dawned on me that one could at least say what she wasn't, namely modern. From there I went on to try to place her in relation to her contemporaries, such as Williams and Moore.

INTERVIEWER

What about contemporary fiction? Do you read it for both pleasure and profit?

CLAMPITT

I don't read a lot of it. Of those writers I know, Alice Munro is my very favorite. She's a marvelously precise and subtle recorder of social change, and there seems to be no permutation of human oddity beyond the reach of her sympathy. I never feel that she is recycling her own experience under other names, as one does with even very good fiction writers a lot of the time. And along with the range of her sympathy she draws on a likewise endless permutation of method. There are always surprises. And the way she deals with change, what memory does to the past, is the way a poet would. A very different writer, but one who has something of the same tenderness for particular times and places, is E.L. Doctorow. I've just lately read *Billy Bathgate*—maybe his best book and a real page-turner besides. I'm a fan of Allan Gurganus. I devoured A.S. Byatt's *Possession*—the perfect book to read while recovering

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from a bad cold. I'm invariably enthralled by Cynthia Ozick. That gives you some idea.

INTERVIEWER

I take it that you haven't written another novel since those early three, so that we need not discuss your own prose fiction?

CLAMPITT

These days writing a novel is the last thing I can imagine doing. And much of the fiction I read is from the nineteenth century. Hal and I have been reading Dickens aloud for years; we find it more fun than going to a movie. There's the sheer exuberance; though it says something about his limitations that doing the villains is generally what we enjoy most—Grandpa Smallweed, Mr. Pecksniff, Jonas Chuzzlewit, Alfred Jingle and Job Trotter. We recently finished *The Pickwick Papers*. Besides the fun, there's the extension of one's experience of human nature—the novel as a branch of history. The same is eminently true of *Les misérables*, which we began reading just lately. And also of *I promessi sposi*, which I finally got around to during a three-day recuperation, not long ago—a real masterpiece, from which I'm conscious of having learned enormously, not only about seventeenth-century Lombardy, but in a more general way about society as an organism, which means seeing human behavior at its best as well as its worst. The only contemporary American novel I can think of to compare with it at all is *The Make-Believers* by Barry Fleming—a book I happened upon not long ago, and that is scarcely known. The author died recently, at the age of ninety or so.

INTERVIEWER

If you had to construct a poet out of whole cloth, how would you begin?

CLAMPITT

Well, I think it goes without saying that you'd start with someone who refused to grow up. I don't know exactly why that's important, except that if you're totally grown up, you're

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somehow set in your emotional ways so that you're not surprised in the kinds of ways that poets tend to be.

INTERVIEWER

Is there any question I haven't asked that you want to ask and answer?

CLAMPITT

Something I feel bound to mention is the part played by sheer luck in a writer's career. Alison Lurie has spoken of this, and I completely agree with her that it tends to be overlooked. Over the past ten years or so, I've been very lucky. Being in the hands of good fortune can't but be a humbling thing.

—**Robert E. Hosmer, Jr.**

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The Burning Shoe

Josip Novakovich

My father's assistant Nenad used to tell us stories while hammering nails into the wood to pinch the leather so no water would leak into the clogs he was making. The hammer punctuated his stories like a *gusle*, the instrument of singers of tales, but more sharply, less melodiously.

Nenad told us about Tzarevich Marko, who sucked his mother's breasts for seven years and for seven more ate nothing but honey. Marko could squeeze water out of a log dried for nine years. His horse could jump the length of nine lances and the height of three. On hot summer days a hawk in the sky shaded him with its wings. Marko slew Musa Kesejiya, the Albanian giant, in whose breast, beneath three rib cages were three hearts—the first working, the second dancing and the third nesting a sleeping snake. When the snake awoke, the dead Musa leaped over the barren land.

Twenty years after Nenad had told his stories to my brother Ivo and me, I rushed to Weeping Willow, the village in Slavonia where he now worked as a clog maker on his own. Where once horses ploughed the fields along a dirt road, tractors oozed green oil in puddles along a paved highway. A cracked

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wooden shoe still hung from a pole on Nenad's whitewashed house to advertise his trade.

After an hour of talking (mostly his), I interrupted him, "You are such a good talker. Do you mind if I record you?" From my shirt pocket, I pulled out a microcassette recorder I had bought in an electronics store in New York's China Town.

Nenad's clear eyes looked at the cassette recorder as if it were a time bomb; his forehead showed its new creases, his graying eyebrows made tall arches, and he didn't talk until I turned off the machine.

"Nenad, where did you learn how to tell tales? At the hearth, on your grandfather's knee?"

"I went to the library, read them, and I told them as I'd remembered them."

A myth fell apart right before my very ears.

"Of course," he said, "I added a thing here and there."

"But. . . . I believed you to be an epic storyteller reared by the spoken Word!"

"After every story you said, More! More! So what could I do? I went to the library on lunch breaks to find more." He opened his calloused hands as if to show me that he hid no weapons in them.

I had thought that, instead of going through a writing workshop back in the States, I would simply listen to him for a couple of days and nights and find the formula for triggering a wellspring of storytelling within me, from our common ground. And now this! "Still, who taught you how to tell stories? Grandmothers?"

"No. Why are you so stuck on this? It's easy to tell a story, what's the big deal? You have to start from somewhere right here and lead the listener farther and farther away, or start from far away and get us here."

"It's easy to say, but do it!"

"Well, you have the beer mug in your hand. You give yourself a bit of time and go—A long time ago there was a beer mug, and it lived in a tavern. Of course, it was not the only mug living there. It lived with its twenty-three siblings. And many a dry lip . . . and off we go, see!"

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"But, *how* would you continue it?"

His wife nudged me to eat one more walnut strudel with honey, though I must have had half a dozen already. I still wanted him to tell me a story, and I wouldn't let him give me a ride home until he did so, just as—though it's not worthy of such an archaic comparison—Jacob held fast to the Angel of God until he obtained a blessing.

"All right, I'll tell you as we drive," he said and I followed him into his Fiat.

We were silent while he cranked the ignition. The forests and fields around the dark village breathed out damp and cool air straight into my nostrils.

"See that tall house? It rests on the foundations of our old house of baked clay."

I couldn't discern anything.

"At the beginning of the war, the Germans barged in there, seized my father and grandfather from the dinner table and shot them to death against the barn.

"Several years later half a dozen Germans walked into our yard, and I had no time to run and hide in the woods, so I hid in bed and shivered under a thick goose-down cover. A pair of boots stamped over the floor boards towards me, louder and louder. The cover was pulled off, and a huge soldier loomed over me. An *agkhh* broke out of my throat, my eyes bulged. The German lowered his hand, I thought to strangle me. Instead, he placed his cold palm on my forehead and held it there. Then he poured a glass of water from the bucket that was on the chair in the kitchen, put some white pills into the water, crushed them with a spoon and pressed my lips with the edge of the glass against my teeth. I could hardly swallow. The liquid was shudderingly bitter—I thought it was poison. I would keel over and die.

"He took a paper sack out of his black leather bag—I guess he was a military doctor—and out of it, a honey cake. Where he'd got it I'll never know, but I am sure he hadn't baked it himself. He gave it to me, and I had never chewed anything sweeter before nor after. He looked sternly at my mouth as if to make sure I was chewing. When I finished, he handed me

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another, and I chewed it slowly, savoring its honey. After swallowing the last of it, I wanted more, but didn't dare ask him. My eyes shifted in the direction of the paper sack.

"The German raised his forefinger and shook it sideways in front of my aching eyes and said, 'Nein!' That was the only word that was said between us.

"He stood up and walked into the yard, his boots crunching gravel, less and less. He shouted something to the soldiers, and they all marched away, raising a screen of dust.

"Eh, my brother, you can't imagine how I felt right then. First he—for me it was one and the same German—kills my father and then gives me the sweetest cakes I could ever have!"

"Humm," that was all I was able to offer in the way of comment.

"I could tell you hundreds of war stories, for three days and three nights, and we still would not be done."

But when I visited him a week later, he said, "I shouldn't have told you any war stories. Since then, almost every night I've been having nightmares. Would you like to help me gather our plums? Last night the wind shook them off the trees."

"Will you make plum brandy?" I asked, skeptical, since he was a pious Calvinist.

"I'm afraid so—just to sell to taverns. The money's so short these days."

I put more plums into my mouth than into the basket—they tasted like pineapples.

From nearby came a loud braying. I had never seen a donkey in the region, so I couldn't trust my ears and asked him what was making that noise.

"A donkey. Ten years ago a boy wanted a donkey, and his father got him one from the coast. The boy grew up, his father and mother died, he went to the army and came back, and there he is, unmarried and living with his donkey. People say all sorts of things about him, but he is a good soul."

An old peasant walked by, galoshes flopping, on the way to Nenad's well. He turned the wheel and the rings of the chain crunched around the spindle. "By the way," the man shouted, noticing Nenad's mutt, who, with the courage of a

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fly, had just attacked a muffler-less truck on the road in front of us. "You should chain your dog."

"Why? The poor soul enjoys his freedom."

"Forget freedom. Yesterday he chased Petkovich's sheep into the creek—lucky thing he didn't drive them over the cliff. Hasn't Petkovich come over here to complain yet?"

"No, Uncle Petar."

"Well, chain the bum if you don't want trouble."

As the old man carried his bucket away, tongues of water splashed left and right into the dust.

"He's been to America too," Nenad said. "You'd never be able to tell it by looking at him."

"Well, can you tell such a thing? I'm sure you can't see any change in me."

"I can. You've got more of a swagger than before. You know, quite a few people from Weeping Willow went to the States between the world wars." He counted them on his fingers, pointing to the houses obscured by trees, barns, stacks of hay. He ran out of fingers and started another round. "About a half of them came back, not much better off than before. But Uncle Petar had won ten thousand dollars on horse races—at least that's what he said. I think he'd exchanged his lungs for the money in Montana mines. Ten thousand dollars was a lot in the early fifties. Visiting home, here, he spent a thousand a day. If somebody wanted a bike, he bought him one. Radio sets, hats, ploughs, vodka, phonographs, sun glasses, guns—anything the peasants could think of, he bought them. People from other villages came and asked for presents. On Uncle's way out of the village a long procession accompanied him, longer than a doctor's funeral, longer than Tito's crew of Mercedeses and military policemen on this road paved just for Tito's visit. Two months later, Uncle Petar was back from America. He said he didn't want to make any more money for presents. I think he was scared of those coal mines. Now he's one of the poorest people in the village."

The air was so clear—a powerful wind blew the night before—that I could see to the south, over Nenad's wheat field, above the red roofs of a village on a hill, a funeral procession

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with a horse-pulled hearse snaking its way up a dirt road and beyond it, some fifty miles away, the blue mountains of Bosnia, flattened like wet shirts on a drying line. To the east the approaching black clouds trapped the light from the setting sun, so that the beech forest beneath them glowed. We took baskets full of blue plums into the workshop and placed them among wooden soles stacked in pillars near a round wood-burning stove. "Does the stove look familiar?" he asked.

"Yes. It used to be in my father's workshop, in the winter the iron glowed. . . ."

"I love that stove. But once in a while I look at it and get a fright. I see your dead father rubbing his hands above it. You know what your father was like—strict. One winter morning I heard his footsteps and just then I mis-hit a nail. The point of the nail poked through into the insole. I didn't want him to see my mistake, so I put the shoe into this stove.

"He comes in and says, 'It's freezing!' He stamps the snow off his clogs on the dirt floor, rubs his blue hands and dashes to the furnace. I freeze, my hand with the hammer up in the air, nails between my lips, like some worker's monument. He grabs a log, opens the furnace, and his arm freezes. He leans his stubbly face almost all the way into the furnace, and he has something to see: flames dance on his wooden shoe in all the rainbow colors, wood crackles, the leather hisses.

'So, Nenad, is that how you work for me?'

'Agh, sorry . . . it was no good, a mistake.'

'A mistake? Sabotage! Vandalism!'

'But *Meister*'—we always used German words in the trade—the nail stuck out!'

'So? You should hammer better. You could have pulled it out and rasped the crack.'

'But the crack was a little too big.'

'You could have waxed it!'

'But that takes time. I heard you coming. I feared your strictness.'

'Strictness? I'm so lenient! . . . You are fired!'

'Agh, please, don't. What will my Mother say? Where can I find another job this time of the year?'

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'You should have thought of that earlier. If you had at least spared the leather.'

'I didn't have the time.'

'You'll have enough time now. Out!'

I begged him, but he again said, 'Out.' I kicked off my clogs and walked barefoot out into the snow. He caught up with me near the post office. I hastened my pace.

'Hey, it's all forgiven and forgotten. I put myself in your shoes. It's all right.'

I was embarrassed. It was Saturday, a market day, and crowds of people stared at us—two sawdust covered men, one pulling the other by the sleeve. When we were past the square, I said, 'You fired me. How can you go back on your word?'

'I was too rash.'

'But, *Meister,* we aren't Gypsies—to be ready to kill each other one minute and to kiss each other the next. If you say something, mean it, yes–yes, no–no.'

'So, if in a fit of rage you say you'll kill a man, later when you're sober you'll kill him?'

'Yes.'

He laughed and put his arm on my shoulder and said, 'Eh, that's no good.'

'I'd just watch out not to say something like that.'

'When you are mad, you can say such a thing. Think about it. It's good to forgive quickly. If that's what Gypsies are like, let's learn from them. Come on, let's go back.'

'No, I can't change my horses like that—so quickly! At least let me stew for a while!'

'All right, you can come back to work tomorrow, but please take my shoes.'

"I refused, he insisted, and I accepted one of his clogs. To get my shoes, we hopped back to the workshop—he had the right shoe, I the left. I remember that because it was awkward to hop on my left foot. For a bet we raced, and I slid over a patch of ice where kids had poured water over the packed snow on the pavement and smoothed it with their feet, to skate. All the streets were iced, and the old people didn't dare walk outside.

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"In the workshop, he stuffed the stove with wood. Your sister brought us tea with honey. A drop of honey stuck to his mustache, glittering. I remember that because when he rubbed his mustache with the back of his hand, he said he wanted to give me a raise. I protested, but he put wads of cotton in his ears and pressed blocks of wood against the saw to make soles. I sat on my chair, a log of beech, and nailed the leather into wood. Four strokes a nail—the fourth always made the deepest sound. The whole workshop shivered with the proud music of work."

Here Nenad paused and said, "That's what I've been having nightmares about all week. As soon as I saw you, I said to myself, 'Here's one of his sons. I'll dream about *Meister* again.' He walks into the shop, rubs his hand above the stove, and I am scared he'll see the shoe burning."

He knit his brows, took off his sawdusty cap and slapped it against his knee.

His wife, passing by our bench in front of his workshop, said, "That's true, he *dreams.* And then he talks about it for hours."

Nenad's tabby jumped, grabbed the rim of his cap and tried to pull it out of his hands. Nenad scratched the cat on the head and said, "My dear kitty."

He patted her more affectionately that I had ever seen a man his age do, and he talked on. "You know, one night in 1943 the Germans entered the village and were about to round up twenty or thirty people to kill because the partisans had killed a couple of German soldiers in the woods nearby. But the soldiers were hungry, and first they axed some chickens to cook quietly at a house secluded in an apple orchard, where nobody from the rest of the village could see them. There were some black cats there, and no black cats ever came to our end of the village. So, when I saw a black cat running down the road with a rooster's bloody head in its mouth, I screamed, 'The Germans are coming!' We ran with our neighbors into the woods and listened to the rifles. The Germans killed ten, but most of the people in the village were saved—by the black cat!" He picked

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up his tabby, which, green and with patches of brown, looked like a camouflaged paratrooper.

He is an unstoppable storyteller, I thought. Instead of a writing program, I need a war. Then I'd have enough stories to last me a lifetime.

The chains of his well crunched again. A woman in a red and white handwoven scarf pulled the wheel.

"You don't know my Aunt Julia, do you?"

"He's talking about the war again," she said. "And what does he know about it? He was just a kid." The ruddy woman poured the water into her bucket and continued. "It was no worse then than it is nowadays. I was young and so pretty that I was among the four village girls the German officers invited to a ball. The officers danced with us. They didn't make passes at us or use dirty language. And while we lived for the evening like high society, we didn't know that the common soldiers outdoors slaughtered three dozen of our people, even some girls. My good looks saved me then. And now they are gone."

"Not your looks, the good Lord saved you, and I wish he'd save your soul too!" Nenad's mother squeaked like a stork as she walked by. She was in her eighties and still wore black for her dead husband. Many people, when faced with the atrocities of men, lose faith in God, but she strengthened hers. Her prayers in the church were the lengthiest, and her face bore more creases than any other, yet her eyes were calm and mild and now caressing her son.

"Yeah," Nenad said. "There were seven or eight raids in our village during the war, and it's a miracle so many of us survived. One night *ustashas,* Croatian Nazi soldiers, went through the village knifing young men and throwing them into a pit of wet mortar to make sure none of them would live to join the partisans. Two *ustashas* had gone stealthily ahead of the company and told the people to run for the woods. Those two saved quite a few people. I don't know how they got into that vicious army, but there they were able to do more good than if they'd worked for the Red Cross."

"I am surprised you don't have war nightmares every night," I said.

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"I have more nightmares about your father . . . No, I am not complaining. It doesn't take much to see that since my father was killed, *Meister* became like a father to me. Almost all I know, I learned from him."

"Storytelling too?" I tried to interrupt him, but he followed his own train of thought.

"We were always together, day in and day out for twenty years, working, laughing, swearing, hating each other's guts—we became a part of each other, we loved each other! That's it, we *loved* each other."

I recalled the horrors of my dreams of my father—dying again, slowly, putridly, falling apart under my touch, as if made without connective tissues—and listened on.

"I wasn't happy when my mother took me to him for apprenticeship. She had first taken me to a restaurant to become a waiter, and on my first day I dropped a tray with drinks when a lady customer winked at me. At night I sleepwalked with a tray, balancing plates and glasses one atop another, and walked like that on a log fence. In the morning I juggled glasses until I shattered them all. I balanced pots, eggs and pebbles so well that a circus would have employed me.

"At work I delivered cognacs like a magician pulling a pigeon from his sleeve. Dressed sharp, I felt like an actor—when serving people, a good actor is their king.

"But when my mother saw me practice winking in the mirror at home, she realized that the juggling was about to cross the boundaries of my trade. She fasted and prayed for me in the plum orchard, loudly during the day and in whispers in her bedroom at night. When she lost her voice, she prayed in the cornfields, wheezing with asthma. I couldn't sleep. I clogged my ears with clay, but her whispers grew louder and more painful in my head.

"Your father, as a Calvinist and shoemaker, was her choice for teaching me a trade.

"Twenty years later I set up my own shop right across the street from *Meister*'s. He left the hospital where he'd lain for kidney stones, and he walked into my shop and said, 'Will you leave me now, now that I desperately need you? And if you

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leave, why don't you get out of my sight? Let us not compete. I don't want you to starve and me to go to the grave.'

"He did much better than I because he got a contract from the glass factory in Belgrade."

"I remember that." I said. "Before our shipping the clogs in big Brazilian coffee sacks to the factory, he, Mother, Ivo and I stayed up several nights in a row. I hammered thousands of nails into the shoes though I was only nine. My thumbs were all blue from my missing the nails whenever I was about to doze off."

"A couple of years later *Meister* said to me, 'You know, whenever I was mad at my family or business, I took it all out on you—you were my lightning rod. Can you forgive me?' I said I could, but I resented his asking, thinking, Here, he wants to make a clean breast of it in a minute, for hundreds of abuses—too easy.

"But it's never easy to ask for forgiveness.

"He was born-again then; he preached, prayed, talked Bible. He talked with Adventists, Baptists, Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Muslims, everybody, and the dilemma whether Sunday or Saturday is the Sabbath, he solved by taking off Friday, Saturday and Sunday as holy days. He gave money to the people he thought he had outwitted in business. Me he gave new rasps and saws.

"The night after he had died of a heart attack, I thought I was dying. An invisible knife pierced my heart. I couldn't draw a breath, I fell in the middle of the room on my back, and my body tingled and trembled as if my fingers were stuck in an electrical socket. 'Don't be scared,' my wife said, 'I am going to get the preacher.' The preacher! I thought, I must be dying. Otherwise she'd get a doctor.

"The doctor came with the preacher and gave me tranquilizers. The preacher sent me to some Calvinists in the Julian Alps in Slovenia to breathe fir-smelling air. My attacks grew worse. I thought hell gaped, about to swallow me into its stomach of flame. I begged God to heal me, promising to become His slave. As I uttered the prayer, the knife was drawn out of my

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heart. I haven't had an attack since then, in twenty-one years, three months, and eleven days!"

Blue sheets of lightning shivered in the east, revealing the dark horizon; a steady roar shook the earth.

"I remembered the promise I'd made, although I had made it for the wrong reason—fear."

"But, *the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,* isn't it?" I said.

"The fear of hell, isn't. So, now I wanted to be a saint. I tried to pay back anybody I had got the better of. But I couldn't do it—many had got the better of me. I had to support my three kids and wife.

"From the town we moved to the village so our children wouldn't keep bad company. It didn't work. Two of my sons began to go to bars at fifteen. They picked up fights and girls. Mirko took up weight lifting and was the champ arm wrestler, and still one night in a brawl two guys painted him blue with bruises.

"I wanted my family to read books. I didn't want a TV set though I loved "Bonanza" and soccer, but my wife, who hated moving out to the village, she wanted one. When I refused to buy it, she smashed all the windows and doors and tables in the house with an axe. I begged her on my knees—before my conversion I wouldn't have been so meek—to stop. She screamed she would stop if I drove into the town and got her a TV set. And I did. My mother was scandalized that we'd have that "tool of the Devil" in our household. Whenever she passed through the living room, she turned her head away from the set because she thought it was a sin to look at the screen. But once, as she walked through the room, there was a moment of quiet on the show until one of the characters shouted 'Stephanie!' That's my mother's name. She turned, faced the screen and gasped. She asked me, 'How does he know me? When did the Devil give him my name?' Mother is still ashamed that she's looked at the screen.

"I spent more time talking Bible than selling wooden shoes. But in one village at a fair, three large Eastern Orthodox guys ganged up on me. One said, 'I have my God from the great-

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grand folks of my great-grandparents, and where do you get your new god to sell to us like shoes?'

'It's one and the same God,' I say.

'No, it isn't. Don't insult mine,' he says.

"And the other two swore and cussed in such ugly words that the heavens were burning and smoking. They dragged me out of the village, tossed me in a ditch and told me that if I showed up again, they would peel off my skin and rub salt in my wounds. The Bible says you should feel blessed when persecuted, but I didn't. There are three villages in the area I can't set my foot in."

I yawned, anticipating that he would start preaching to me in the good Baptist tradition.

"I know the war interests you more, but . . ." He spread his arms apologetically and gracefully continued to stretch his right arm, to grip the fridge handle. He offered me beer in an iced mug. "I saw that in an American movie," he said, "You freeze your mugs. Hum, seeing you reminds me too much of your father not to talk about him—same eyebrows, same stubble. Anyway, your father used to tell good stories, but never a word about the war."

"True." Finally I said a word too. In his talking, Nenad had gained so much momentum that all I could do was nod my head, yeaing and naying, huhing and humming, like a young donkey learning to bray. "He used to tell us stories from *Don Quixote,* but when he died, I was only eleven, so I don't remember how he would tell stories. Nobody tape-recorded him and I can't hear his voice in my head."

"He was quite a talker," Nenad said. "Once he had just come back into town from a large fair on a muddy day. His clothes were all muddy, but he was happy, playing his tambourine and singing, because when the soil is muddy, the clogs sell like aspirin when there are toothaches. He had sold all the clogs he'd taken to the fair, and his pockets were bulging. He walked into a restaurant, but the waiters wouldn't serve him. He went home, changed into his Sunday best, and returned to the restaurant. All the waiters now ignored the other guests and danced around him, bringing him all he wanted, and

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addressing him with *sir* and *Monsieur*. When the table was loaded down with lamb, trout, caviar, cognac, chocolate cakes—without tasting any of it, he stood up and walked out. A couple of waiters ran after him demanding he pay. He ignored them, but they insisted, and he said, 'Who are you talking to? Me?'

'Yes, you.'

'No, it cannot be. You are talking to my jacket. You didn't serve me but my jacket. But the jacket happens to have no money, so I doubt very much that it will pay you.'

"I don't remember how the story ended, and I don't know whether he'd made it up. But we better call it a night now."

As I walked to the train station, the leaves in the woods—the tongues of the wind—murmured. The stones on the shoulder of the road crunched beneath my feet and told me how Jesus was tempted in the desert to make bread out of stones, and instead how he made wine out of the water. The stones retold me how the vicious armies and the good people had passed through. And I thought, If the stones can tell the stories, I can too.

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Frederick Tibbetts

Remarks on Our City

Our language can be seen as an ancient city.
—Wittgenstein

It should be entered from the old quarter
At its center, the easiest part to get lost in.
—It happened to many of us here, as children:
Suddenly looking up to no one you knew,
Turning the wrong way down a street like this
Into a maze of old houses, smaller streets,
Till you face, down an impasse, a cold church
Looming like a ship.
—Later, we notice less
But know more. For instance, that the front of
The Church of the Innocents, with its calm
Orders of columns, is centuries younger than
The heavy buttresses behind; that it stands
On the site of minor thermae, built around
A spring with curative virtue, now gone.

Gone, too, the marshes on whose hem
An unknown people raised a settlement
That conquerors preferred to build over
Than remove—the marshes to be claimed later,
Acre by acre, if the city were ever to grow,
As it did.
How much stone from the first
Stone buildings must still be here somewhere,
In a foundation, a cistern, a wall—
Re-using the old is always easier,
And there is so much old stonework here.
Sometimes inscriptions are found, and pondered.

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Here is the Prefecture, its high grilles
And copper-green wicket. It was the ducal seat
Before a grander one was built. There is
The Hôtel-Dieu, its checkered tile roofs
The gift of a wealthy donor. —As you see,
Everything is crowded in together. No room
Was ever made for a larger, central square.
If you want relief, you must go over
To the Jardin des Orphelins, so called because
It formerly neighbored the Home of the Wards
Of Mercy. The long alley of lime-trees
Is kept pollarded the old way, the neat
Parterres are covered with snow. Strange
To think these grounds, so close to the heart,
Once lay wholly outside the city walls!
(The walls themselves dismantled long ago.)

Now you can cross the Pont des Arts (plainer
Than its name) over the river that must have
Fed the marshes. *On* this bridge, at one time,
Were rows of shops, and homes above the shops:
I imagine them close and safe, like a dovecot.
One morning, a child in one house would wake
To frost over the window and say, "Look!
The river has turned to ice."
On the other side
Begins the merchant quarter, and along the quays
Are buildings that were the guild halls
Of dyers, tanners, weavers, brewers, masons;
That strove with each other for magnificence
Until the sumptuary code was passed. Today,
Facing bookstalls and flower-stalls (locked up
For winter), they are offices, a consulate,
A bank, a museum. I've never learned
Who occupies the finest, the Quai-aux-Herbes:
Of rose-colored stone, with scalloped step-gables

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And stories of overlaid stone windowframes.
Carved on a roundlet over the doorway,
A caravel stands for the tenuous path to the sea.

This is the last corner of an avenue
Which, if you follow it away from the river,
Takes you past an open-air market, still busy,
The medical school, and an abattoir, then
Enters block after block of uniform housing
Ordered under the Protectory Act.
On one of those blocks my family used to live.
The buildings are drab, of course, but
One day may come to be loved, as the mills
And row-houses of two centuries back are loved,
Perhaps just because they are somewhat melancholy.

—You must go out and see the remains
Of the ancient tower that looked out over
The estuary. They posted watch there for
Raiders who threatened the early habitations.
The boroughs may reach right out and surround
That lonely tower one day. In the past
We might have stood beside its chilly
Rampart, and seen our faraway small city
Drift rootless on a tide of mist.

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Seven Poems by Siri von Reis

The Very Large Telescope

will mark the completion, at last,
of nearly ten years' design. Soon to rise
on a peak in the Chilean desert,

the machine will consist of four
telescopes spaced along a hundred meters,
each telescope with an 8-meter wide

membrane of mirrored glass.
Supports will push and pull the membrane
to balance gravitational effects.

Inflatable, fabric domes will fold
down to open the instruments to the night
sky, enabling them to point

as one into the collecting area.
To focus all four on the same subject,
to combine their light in phase,

will be ambitious in the extreme.
If it works, astronomers might achieve
resolutions sufficient to study

galactic nuclei—to see,
in fine detail, the turmoil of matter
at the birth of stars.

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Quasi-stellar Object

A candidate for a quasar has been detected
by the Infrared Astronomical Satellite:

IRAS 14348-1447 is the brightest, most
distant object in the Bright Galaxy Survey.

The strength of its emission is consistent
with a pattern of violent collisions

(molecular clouds in gas-rich spiral galaxies
that lead to rapid star formation)

and establishment of a dust-enshrouded object
whose raiment ultimately will be blown away

by stellar winds, by supernovae explosions,
by pressure from within the object itself.

For now, the shroud conceals much of the energy
generated by its spectacular, ultraluminous source.

Vast Problem Still Obscure

Most of the mass of the universe
may be contained in dark matter.
No one knows what that may be.

Astronomers say we could be
dealing with planetary objects
unable to produce luminosity;

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some believe we are looking
at black holes or other things
formed when stars are born or die.

(For physicists, the heart
of dark matter lies in axions,
strings, magnetic monopoles.)

If related to stars, dark matter
presumably will be found where
stars are. If indeed exotic,

it won't react with matter
as we know it nor, probably,
with itself; and it surely

will, in any case,
have nothing at all to
do with everyday matter.

A Diet of Glass

Until now, the only vertebrates known
to feed exclusively on sponges were two or three

teleost fishes. A new study hints that
the hawksbill, too, a marine turtle that lives

among tropical corals, may be a dedicated spongivore.
Intestines of Caribbean hawksbills show masses

of spicules, opal needles almost 5 millimeters
long, embedded in the epithelia.

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No vertebrate diet of comparable silica
content has been described. Though well defended,

this food source may yield to predation
by the large, mobile turtles. Removal of huge

amounts of slow-growing sponges could, in turn,
accelerate reef change. Hawksbills thus

are endangered by their preference for Porifera
and, of course, by the tortoiseshell trade.

In Amber

The specimen, from the Cordillera Septentrional,
exhibits visual characteristics of natural

Dominican ambers. Tests verify authenticity,
as do color and hardness correlating

with the great age of La Toca materials.
The clear, yellow amber containing the one-inch frog

weighs an ounce. The frog's right arm is broken
at the far end of the humerus, the left leg at the tip

of the tibiofibula. Entombment of the frog
was probably traumatic. A predator may have brought it

to a nest in a resinous tree, where frog
and nest adhered to the resin, with decomposing bones

of other frogs, maggots, a large centipede.
The frog's skin and eyes remain intact, transparent.

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Radiographs showing fine details of vomer, dentition,
vertebral column, pectoral and pelvic girdles

assign it to *Eleutherodactylus.* Among amber finds,
the frog is the third complete vertebrate,

the first amphibian, to be described. It documents
a diverse fauna on Hispaniola

20 million years earlier than heretofore
believed. The frog is very fragile,

very quiet, very safe.

Luminist, National Gallery

One could easily overlook his 60 placid paintings
in the current show. From 1840 until he
died, Fitz Hugh Lane focused

a topographer's eye on New England shorelines,
documenting calm in an era of big clippers,
swift yachts, steamships that jostled

three-masted merchant vessels in Boston's
crowded harbor. Steersmen and towns
in his early work—Gloucester

fishermen, the America's Cup race—
gave way to works stripped of
anecdote, all light, hush,

spirit: *Becalmed off Halfway Rock,*
The Western Shore with Norman's
Woe, Ipswich Bay, Christmas

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Cove. In these, Lane painted what he saw
with care, showing banal events
in a bare-bone, spare

format reporting color—momentary,
diffuse, efflorescent. One sees
each boat begin to sail away,

the sun about to disappear, the American
sky vast and isolated, looking
forward, looking back.

Glittering Ghost

Hundreds came to pay tribute and to pick over more
than 22,000 objects: sequined vests, fur coats, goblets,
bedroom sets, vases, vitrines, dolls, limousines

and trucks. Willie Collins got candelabra and other
props for his Look-Alike Show. He tried on 30 outfits.
"Believe me, even the shoes are right."

Bob Nye, keyboard dealer from Reading, Pa.,
paid a fortune for the Baldwin with its gold-tufted
adjustable bench. "I've got the world's biggest

organ, and I resemble him." Mrs. Joyce Childers,
her hair in a beehive, came from Abilene. "If you'd ever
seen him in person, he made you feel as elegant

as he was." She remembers his stepping into
the audience to show his rings up close. "Do you like
these?" he would ask. "I'm so happy. You helped

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pay for them." James 'Jimmy' Von Stodt of Long
Beach said only, "I loved that man." Mr. Von Stodt
was wearing an orange and white tank top, orange

cord shorts, white sandals, gold necklaces
and a diamond in his earlobe, under a hearing aid.
Mirror-faced, with a see-through lucite lid,

the Steinway, highlight of the sale, brought over
$42,000 by phone, from a London buyer. Another, signed
by the late owner, went to the National Museum

of Malaysia. Not allowed to bid, his brother's
widow hoped friends would be able to buy her the panda
Oriental rug that once adorned the Tivoli Gardens

Restaurant. "That's where we had our family dinners."
It took four days to knock everything down—with piano-
shaped paddles. Proceeds will be gathered to endow

A Foundation for the Creative and Performing Arts.

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Two Poems by George Bradley

The Fire Fetched Down

When they knew what he had given them,
This florid colossus with the sunrise in his eyes
And skin the color of perfectly ripened fruit,
Understood what he had done in the name of freedom,
Of self-esteem, their first thought was to give it back,
Who had been happy in their miserable condition,
Had been content each hour to kill or cringe,
Pleased to end their days in the detached mercy
Of stupent sense, the sweet shock that flesh is air to;
When they saw what he intended, this monstrous
Avatar wrapped in conceits of agony, of honor,
Their every instinct (before such brute reflex
Was blunted by the dull weight of the abstract)
Was to spurn the bounty, slay the bearer, to destroy
The visiting light, its unwanted complication.
After all, his differences had not been theirs,
His absurd dispute with the divine, his squabble
About a sacred ox and some celestial secret;
His ambition for their state was nothing they could grasp,
And they wished only to be as they had been, dying
To extinguish the moted mazy rays that floated
Like gleaming locks on his titanic head, to blot out
The subtle moonbeams that shone so as he smiled. . . .
But the fire he brought was beautiful, a jewel
Of countless facets, a spectrum infinitely broad,
An aetherial motion they never tired of looking on;
The flame was gorgeous, and they were human,
And they took that gift, reaching to accept
The ember of ideas, the conflagration of tongues,
And then his name was their name (*Forethought,*
Premonition, how the word had frightened them!),

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And his pain became theirs, too,
Chained in the rational abyss and torn
Time and again by cruel and busy claws, raked
By the razor bill of what they could conclude.

Nanosecond

Someday it must make sense,
This badgering of the past, this fever for a future tense,
Will all add up, although
You'll know by that it's passed from the realm of what we know
Into another kingdom instead;
Somehow the remarkable, if passive, role played by the dead
And tomorrow's heralding
Must merge into conviction, an idea of heirloom quality, a *Ding*
An sich to have and having hold,
And you will grasp the fact that even for the very old
At heart, the object of existence
Is best viewed as an amulet, a token of venerable resistance
To be worn against what aches.
As mutable moons come up, as relentless sunlight breaks
On your dullness like a mood,
Provoking all the natural reactions of rage and gratitude
In all it is enlightening
(Stones throwing gabbroid weight around, vines tightening
Their python grip on a dungheap,
Thoughts rising, swirling, flying like the sparks that leap),
You will believe the braid
Of tangled moments forms a noose you must enter to evade;
Till then, you'll have to live
With something more or less, say with a photographic negative,
With a precisely-drawn

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And haloed absence, the outline left by wisdom when it's
gone.
For now, this instant is inferno,
A perduring pain, a constant goad permitting you to spare no
Expense in explanation;
Today the nanosecond is your paradise, a minute expectation
Met and met, a never ending song,
And you're persuaded only that you've never been persuaded
long
Or been vouchsafed the key
That might unlock what passes into the great dream of
eternity.
Booted off the puffy cloud,
Driven from the smorgasbord of what bliss may be allowed,
What compensation shall we say
Confronts a fractured energumen, awaits the devotee of day?
But there's no way to wish it were:
The implacable myopia has you in thrall, has caught you in
its blur,
And the snafu speaks your name;
As you step into its fragrance, your footprints burst into flame.

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James Cummins

Sestina

So bondage is a big part of it, after all—
that old art of rendering a lover submissive:
a tactic, a strategy. Denying somebody's body
the power to move denies that body the power
to be believed. Isn't that what's so sexual?
The intimate plea? The fear you can't go back?

Until your lover throws you over on your back.
Maybe a woman becomes a man, then. After all,
it's the head games that conjure up the sexual:
which one agrees, this time, to be submissive;
which one straps on the fetishes, the powers,
we make to make the body yield up the body . . .

O the rendering, the surrendering of the body!
We so much want to go back, all the way back . . .
You stand before a mirror, naked, the power
of someone's eyes, words, erasing you, the all
you claim to be. Belief can be so submissive:
desire, not truth. But being believed is sexual

vantage: the crying out, the echo, the sexual
need you never knew could subjugate the body . . .
So you cry out at the idea of her, submissive,
yes, her hands your hands, *yes,* leading you back,
her voice your voice, *o god,* eyes lips cunt all
mirroring, *yes,* the glory, *o god yes,* the power . . .

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Later, you wipe off the remnants of the power
with Kleenex. When you get down to the sexual
level, you get sexually levelled, that's all:
doesn't discipline make a believer of the body?
You whisper no name but hers in the going back.
Tomorrow, it will be her turn to be submissive:

the ties that bind render you both submissive.
You'll need her to believe your plea, her power;
she'll need you to escort her all the way back,
before the life alongside this life, her body
alongside yours: ravenous, indifferent, sexual.
There, anything might happen, anything at all,

if all you need is to be believed. The power
of the sexual plea masquerades as the submissive
act. The body is the flower of the going back.

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Irving Feldman

Interrupted Prayers

The sun goes, So long, so long, see you around.
And zone by zone by zone across America
the all-night coast-to-coast ghost café lights up.
Millions of dots of darkness—the loners,
the losers, the half alive—twitch awake
under the cold electronic coverlet,
and tune in their radios' cracked insomnia.
A static craziness scratches and buzzes
inside the glowing tombstones of talk
—some crossed wires' hodgepodge dialogue,
or Morse and remorse of garbled Maydays
of prayers shot down by Heaven's deaf ear.
Heaven itself is crashing tonight.
The signal breaks up, it fades. Silence.
Then static, then chatter. Then silence. And still
—poor peeves and griefs, poor spirits—from all
the alien area codes we phone in
our cries . . .
"Hello, Larry?"
"Go ahead, Cleveland, you're on the air!"
"Larry, this is Don in Cleveland.
Longtime listener, first-time caller,"
booms a voice
that could float you home in a hurricane
—that big and rich, that cheery; its billion bucks
IV directly into the bankrupt heart.
It's one A.M. and, God knows, I need it bad,
just one little hit of hopefulness.
I dial Don down to whisper, curl closer,
plug myself into the keyhole of sound.

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Feed me! Be me!
"Great show, Larry, great interview!
Loved it, Larry! My hat definitely is off
to you."
And mine to you, Don, I whisper, for
the lovely pure bullion of your accolade
—this gift you bring to Being's bright mountain!
And, rising in radio space, there Being *is*.
My heart's successful twin—I look up to it:
the whole rock, passion amassed as majesty.
Don out there in Cleveland (and Bruce in Duluth,
Duke in Dubuque, Harry in Gary), you show me
that Being is praise and praise is Being,
and how amazingly possible life could be.
So, I'm piggybacking on you, voice of Don.
Carry me home! Take me where I want to be!
In my heart of hearts I'm praising Larry, too.
Yes, I'll phone him up and say, Larry, you are
the greatest! This is me, Irving—you know,
in Buffalo!

Flat and harsh—Larry's voice
interrupts.
"No names—please!"
"What, Larry? What?"
"*No names, please. And please turn down your radio.*"
"What, Larry?"
"I said, 'Lower it, sir—your radio!'"
So Pluto puts down the upstart corpse.
Silence. Don off-mike fumbling in his room.
And silence. And silence . . . until silence one
dead second too long rips it open again:
the jagged gash black in the heart of Being
—the secret fissure where the whips are kept.
Suddenly, he's back—though not all of Don
has made it through the communication gap;
something's missing: the fizz, the zip, the good gism,
which night by night he's hoarded drop by drop.

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"Sorry, Larry. I am absolutely sorry."
Silence. This silence swallows mountains whole . . .
—Don in limbo awaiting acknowledgement,
put there by Larry on eternal hold.
But then, "Great show, Larry, great interview!"
Don booms, re-running his spiel from the start.
I almost see it shrivel, the hand he's held out
to Larry taken in hand by the night instead.
But what a fool he must feel, hearing his words
grimace at themselves in the mirror of silence
—like starting over your interrupted prayer,
As I was saying, God . . . or, shouting now
to your beloved's bad ear, I said, darling,
I love you!
"I have a comment and a question."
Don plunges on, "and then I'll hang up, Larry,
and listen to your answer."
"What is your question?"
"My comment, Larry, is just this: Larry,
if anyone's out there, I mean, anyone at all,
who's contemplating suicide—don't do it, please!
I tried it once. It's not worth it—believe me.
So please, I beg you, please get help, get help fast!
See a counselor, a minister, a *therapist!*"
The marvelous T-word sizzles on his tongue.
"I can't emphasize this enough. But Larry,"
he segues smooth as a pro, right on beat,
"I'm really phoning in to ask you this.
Historically, twenty-two major leaguers
have played in four different decades in the Bigs.
Larry, can you tell me how many of them
are active now? And can you tell me their names,
Larry—please?"

They're playing our song again
on the suicide trivia hotline.
Once there were worlds, and now there's entertainment.

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So let's just relax and enjoy the void-noises
of the whirling debris of shattered places
drifting apart in the wide ocean of air,
calling out, trying to get connected.
And Larry? Lord of soul dumps, Larry trolls
the airways for trash fish, for flounderers.
He tingles when the stricken vibes imply
a flat one's on the line. With his gleaming hook,
he'll play him good, he'll pluck him out, he'll toss him
flopping onto the heap beneath his hams
of the used up, the washed up, the obsolete.
Larry is jocose, superior—a winner.
His tone announces, Hey, everybody, do I
or don't I know a jerk when I feel one?
"*Bat around, fella!*" he says.
And "*Hit for the cycle, man!*
Touch all the bases, baby!
Go, go, go! Go for it, guy!"
"Larry,
Larry, am I getting through to you?"
He's getting through to *me,* alright.
Ex-drowned man, Don's into survival.
He's got longevity on his brain.
Oh, he's making his comeback alright;
and this time he's going all the way
—if only he can die completely.
He's opening his veins to America,
his heart he opens to the blowtorch,
the supple, the darting, greedy eel of flame:
Once you were cold like us, but now you're hot.
Larry, do unto me as you did for Larry.
With these bedraggled facts I saved my life,
see, these last damp straws to which I cling.
Autograph them with your raging acetylene,
with your outrageous adrenalin—and bless them,
please, burn them, please, scald them, with reality!
Larry, show me how to be like you!
(I'll show you, fella. Here's lesson number one:)

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"I haven't got all night, sir.
I have other callers on the line."
Larry's voice holds Don off at lash's length
—not to be contaminated by loser taint.
And certainly success owes this to itself,
to go on being successful,
and always be wanting more—not like ghosts,
who have to hunger for Larry's hunger,
who call and call in, hoping to please him,
because losers can't please themselves.
From admiration, we break our bones,
we hold the shattered stemware up to him,
we say, For you, this toast. I am nothing.
But drink my marrow—and be everything!
Oh well,
Larry is hungry—but Larry is picky.
For who will divide hunger from anger in him?
—because Larry is never satisfied.
(Is Pluto *satisfied* to rule a bunch of stiffs?)
And that's why Larry's a winner, not a loser.
Is success work? Is success luck? What a laugh!
Success is fury, frenzy beyond measure
—the lifewire dancing with its own power,
crackling, too hot to handle; admire it, buddy,
if you want, but get the hell out of the way,
because try to grab it, and you are zapped, you die!
Therefore, Larry scorns praise not fulsome with defeat
—anything more would be effrontery,—
the meat of the broken only is broken enough,
and flesh that failure has predigested.
"Larry,
'Consistency!'—that's the word. To go out there
year in and year out—like yourself, Larry—
and no questions asked just get the job done."
Don doesn't get it, he doesn't have a clue.
"You guys are the real heroes, true professionals.
You should be named our national treasures, Larry,
really—don't you agree?"

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Dear tender wish,
sad furtive ploy: Don sneaking his shy fingers
to touch the handle while the tip flicks lightly
and leaves a little welt of praise on the air
—he wants so much to get a few strokes in,
to have his hand on it when the lash plays nice.
"*What are you, some kind of wacko, sir?*"
"Believe me,
Larry, I'm doing the best I can.
You can't ask for any more than that.
So, look, enjoy your success, Larry,
you've paid your dues, you really have,
and good health to you, and lots more years.
I mean, as long as you've got your health . . .
Hey, Larry, am I right? or am I right?"
"*When you're right, you're right, baby . . .*"
Some solar storm
or perturbation in the ionosphere
sweeps the air clear and blows those voices
God alone knows where, pelting down
their blight of white nights, their acid blizzard
on innocent cornfields and quiet orchards.

"Hello, Larry?"
It's 4 A.M., and, risen from
static and silence, good old Don is back,
cold Lazarus recycled word for word
by courtesy of tape—still trying
to reach the Thaumaturge, still getting through
to Pluto instead . . .
"*Go ahead, Cleveland,*
you're on the air!"

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Marabou

Joy Williams

The funeral of Anne's son Harry had not gone smoothly. Other burials were taking place at the same hour, including that of a popular singer several hundred yards away whose mourner fans carried on loudly under a lurid, striped tent. Still more fans pressed against the cemetery's wrought iron gates screaming and eating potato chips. Anne had been distracted. She gazed at the other service with disbelief, thinking of the singer's songs that she had heard now and then on the radio.

Her own group, Harry's friends, was subdued. They were pale, young, and all wore sunglasses. Most of them were classmates from the prep school he had graduated from two years before, and all were addicts, or former addicts, of some sort. Anne couldn't tell the difference between those who were recovering and those who were still hard at it. She was sure there was a difference, of course, and it only appeared there wasn't. They all had a manner. There were about twenty of them, boys and girls, strikingly alike in black. Later she took them all out to a restaurant. "Death . . . by none art thou understood . . ." one boy kept saying. "Henry Vaughan."

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They were all bright enough, Anne supposed. After awhile he stopped saying it. They had calamari, duck, champagne, everything. They were on the second floor of the restaurant and had the place to themselves. They stayed for hours. By the time they left, one girl was saying earnestly, "You know, a word I like is *interplanetary*."

Then she brought them back to the house, although she locked Harry's rooms. Young people were sentimentalists, consumers. She didn't want them carrying off Harry's things, his ties and tapes, his jackets, anything at all. They sat in the kitchen. They were beginning to act a little peculiar, Anne thought. They didn't talk about Harry much, though one of them remembered a time when Harry was driving, and he stopped at all the green lights and proceeded on the red. They all acted as though they'd been there. This seemed a fine thing to remember about Harry. Then someone, a floppy-haired boy who looked frightened, remembered something else, but it turned out that this was associated with a boy named Pete who was not even present.

About one o'clock in the morning, Anne said that when she and Harry were in Africa, during the very first evening at the hotel in Victoria Falls, Harry claimed that he had seen a pangolin, a peculiar anteater-like animal. He described it, and that's what it was clearly, but a very rare thing, an impossible thing for him to have seen really, no one in the group they would be traveling with believed him. He had been wandering around the hotel grounds by himself, there were no witnesses to it. The group went on to discuss the Falls. Everyone could verify the impression the Falls made. So many hundreds of millions of gallons went over each minute or something, there was a drop of four hundred feet. Even so, everyone was quite aware it wasn't like that, no one was satisfied with that. The sound of the Falls was like silence, total amplified silence, the sight of it exclusionary. And all that could be done was to look at it, this astonishing thing, the Falls, then eventually stop looking, and go on to something else.

The next day Harry had distinguished himself further by exclaiming over a marabou stork, and someone in the group

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told him that marabous were gruesome things, scavengers, "morbidity distilled" in the words of this fussy little person, and certainly nothing to get excited about when there were hundreds of beautiful and strange creatures in Africa that one could enjoy and identify and point out to the others. Imagine, Anne said, going to an immense new continent for the first time and being corrected as to one's feelings, one's perceptions in such a strange place. . . . And it was not as though everything was known. Take the wild dogs for example. Attitudes had changed utterly about the worth of wild dogs. . . .

Abruptly, she stopped. She had been silent much of the evening, and she felt that this outburst had not gone over particularly well. Harry's friends were making margaritas. One of them had gone out and just returned with more tequila. They were watching her uncomfortably, as though they felt she should fluff up her stories on Harry a bit.

Finally one of them said, "I didn't know Harry had been to Africa."

This surprised her. The trip to Africa hadn't worked out particularly well, but it hadn't been a disaster either, it could very well have been worse. They had been gone a month, and this had been very recently. But it didn't matter. She would probably never see these children again.

They sat around the large kitchen. They were becoming more and more strange to her. She wondered what they were all waiting for. One of them was trying to find salt. There was no salt? He opened a cupboard and peered inside, bringing out a novelty set, a plastic couple, Amish or something, she supposed the man was pepper, the woman salt. They were all watching him as he turned the things over and shook them against his cupped hand. Anne never cooked, never used anything in this kitchen, she and Harry ate out, these things were barely familiar to her. Then, it was really quite a normal gesture, the boy unscrewed the head off the little woman and poured the salt inside onto a saucer.

Someone shrieked in terror. It was the floppy-haired boy, he was yelling, horrified. Anne was confused for an instant. Was Harry dying again? Was Harry all right? The boy was

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howling, his eyes were rolling in his head. The others looked at him dully. One of the girls giggled. "Uh-oh," she said.

Two of the boys were trying to quiet him. They all looked like Harry, even the boy who was screaming.

"You'd better take him to the emergency room," Anne said.

"Maybe if he just gets a little air, walks around, gets some air," a boy said.

"You'd all better go now," Anne said.

It was not even dawn yet, of course, it was still very dark. Anne sat there, alone in the bright kitchen in her black dress. There was a run in her stocking. The dinner in the restaurant had cost almost a thousand dollars, and Harry probably wouldn't even have liked it. She hadn't liked it. She wanted to behave differently now for Harry's sake. He hadn't been perfect, Harry, he had been a very troubled boy, a very misunderstood boy, but she had never let him go, never, until now. She knew that he couldn't be aware of that, that she had let him go now. She knew that between them, from now on, she alone would be the one who realized things. She wasn't going to deceive herself in that regard. Even so, she knew she wasn't thinking clearly about this.

After some time, she got up and packed a bag for Africa, exactly the way she had done before. It was a gray duffle. The contents could weigh no more than twenty-two pounds. When she was finished, she put it in the hallway by the door. Outside it was still dark, as dark as it had been hours ago, it scarcely seemed possible.

Perhaps she would go back to Africa.

There was a knock on the door. Anne looked at it, startled, a thick door with locks. Then she opened it. A girl was standing there, not the *interplanetary* one but another one, one who had particularly relished the dinner. She had been standing there smoking for awhile before she knocked. There were several cigarette butts ground into the high-gloss cerulean of the porch.

"May I come in?" the girl asked.

"Why no," Anne said, "no you may not."

"Please," the girl said.

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Anne shut the door.

She went into the kitchen and threw the two parts of the salt shaker into the trash. She tossed the small lady's companion in as well. Harry had once said to her, "Look this is amazing, I don't know how this could have happened actually, but I have these spikes in my head. They must have been there for awhile, but I swear, I swear to you, I just noticed them. But I got them out! On the left side. But on the right side it's more difficult because they're in a sort of helmet, and the helmet is fused to my head see. Can you help me?"

She had helped him then. She had stroked his hair with her fingers for a long, long time. She had been very careful, very thorough. But that had been a unique situation. Usually, she couldn't help him.

There was a sound at the door again, a determined knocking. Anne walked to it quickly and opened it. There were several of Harry's friends there, not just the girl, but not all of them either. "You don't have to be so rude," one of them said.

They were angry. They had lost Harry, she thought, and they missed him.

"We loved Harry too, you know," one of them said. His tie was loose, and his breath was sweet and dry, like sand.

"I want to rest now," Anne told them. "I must get some rest."

"Rest," one of them said in a soft, scornful voice. He glanced at the others. They ignored him.

"Tell us another story about Harry," one of them said. "We didn't get the first one."

"Are you frightening me?" Anne said. She smiled. "I mean, are you trying to frighten me?"

"I think Harry saw that thing, but I don't think he was ever there. Is that what you meant?" one of them said with effort. He turned and as though he were dancing, it looked as though he were dancing, moved down the steps and knelt on the ground where he lowered his head and began spitting up quietly, like a baby. The black grass winked and glittered with it.

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"Harry will always be us," one of them said. "You better get used to it. You better get your stories straight."

"Good night," Anne said. She did not feel frightened. There was an ugly sound in her head was all. It seemed to be falling through her, filling her.

"Good night, *please,*" they said, and Anne shut the door.

She turned off all the lights and sat in the darkness of the house. Before long, as she knew it would, the phone began to ring. It rang and rang, but she didn't have to answer it. She wouldn't do it. It would never be that once, again, when she'd learned that Harry died, no matter how much she knew in her heart that the present was but a past in that future to which it belonged, that the past, after all, couldn't be everything.

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Portfolio

Without Words: Faces

Rainer Gross

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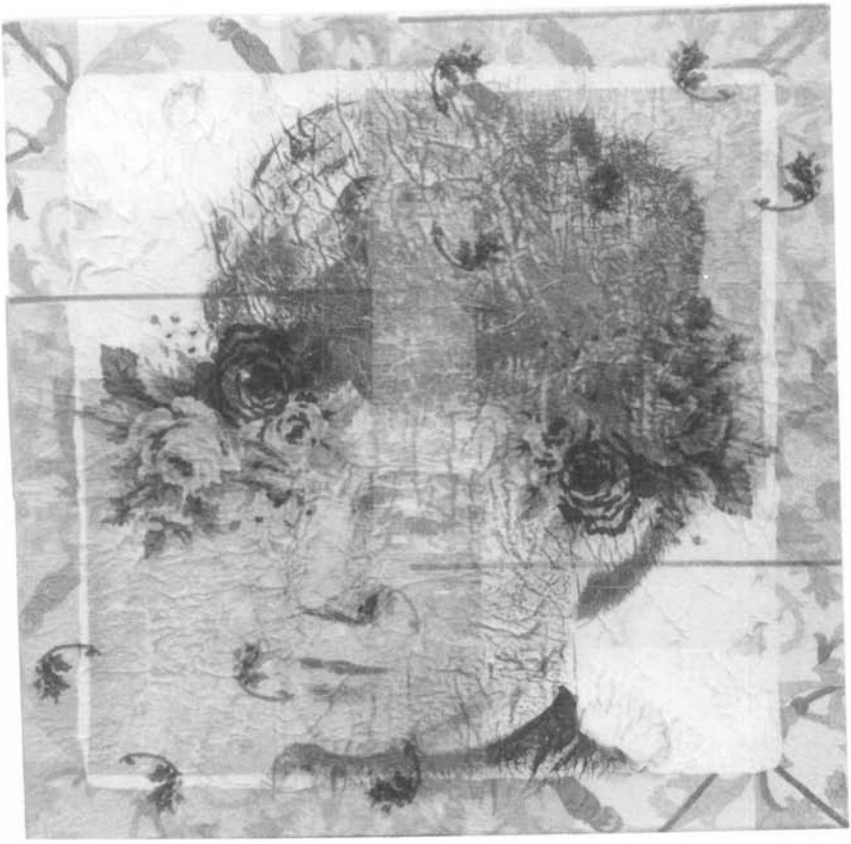

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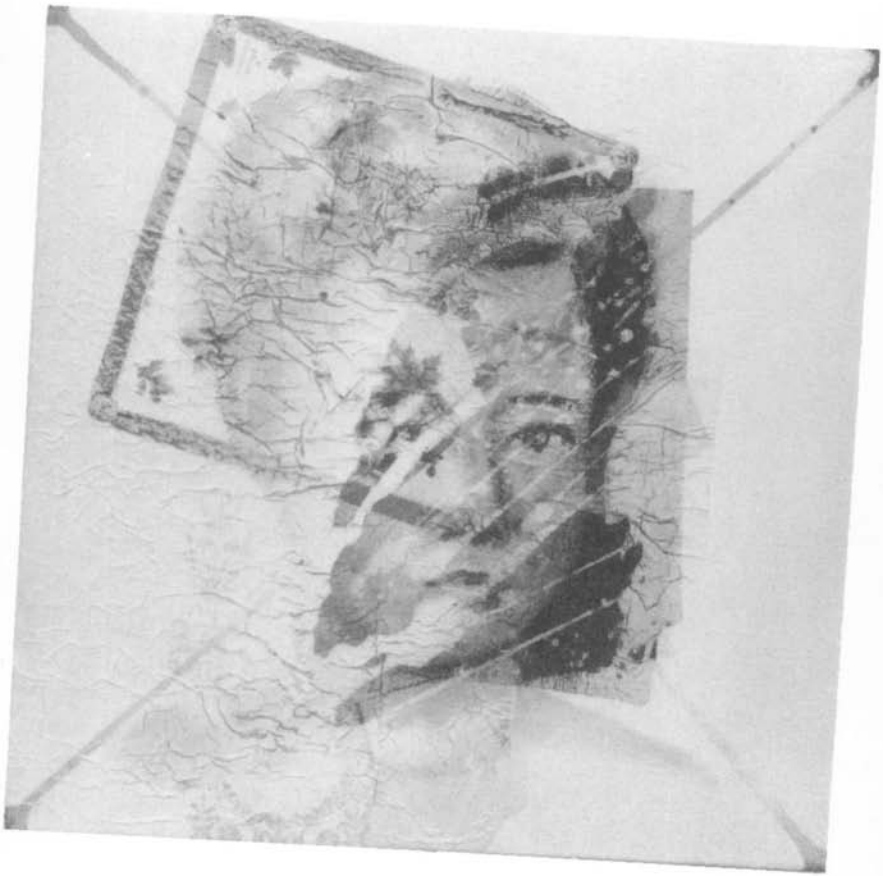

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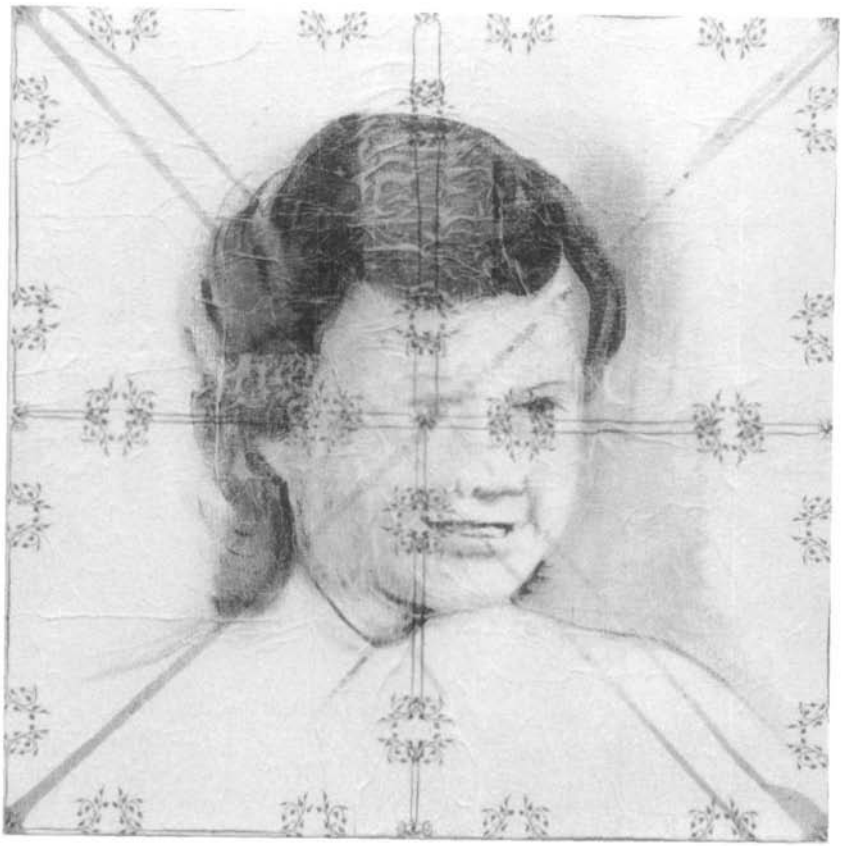

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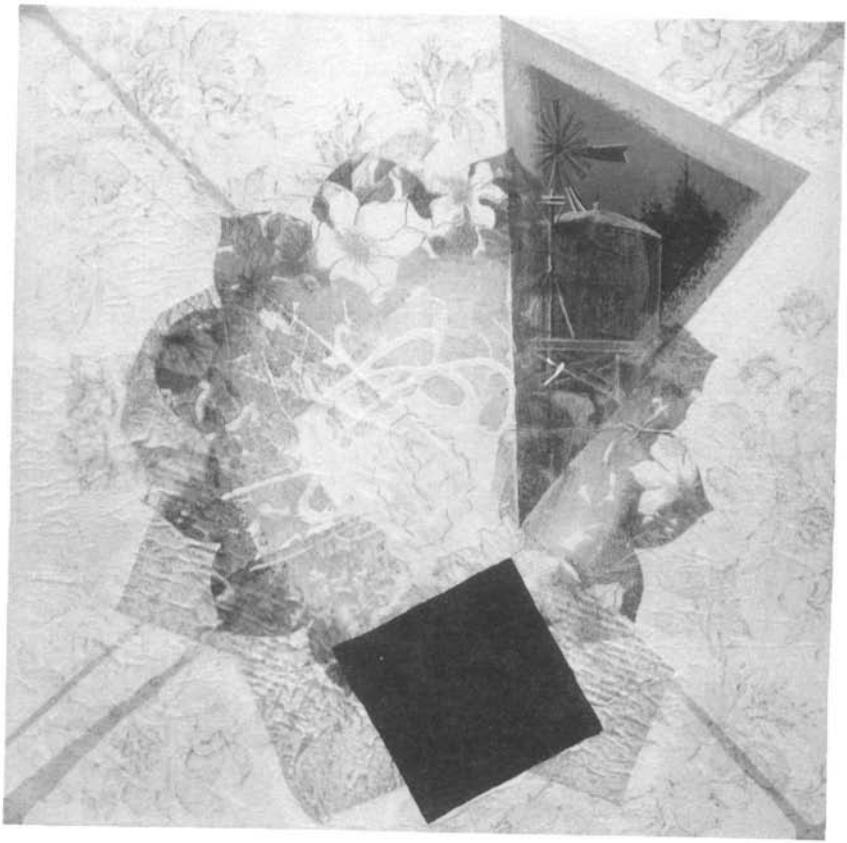

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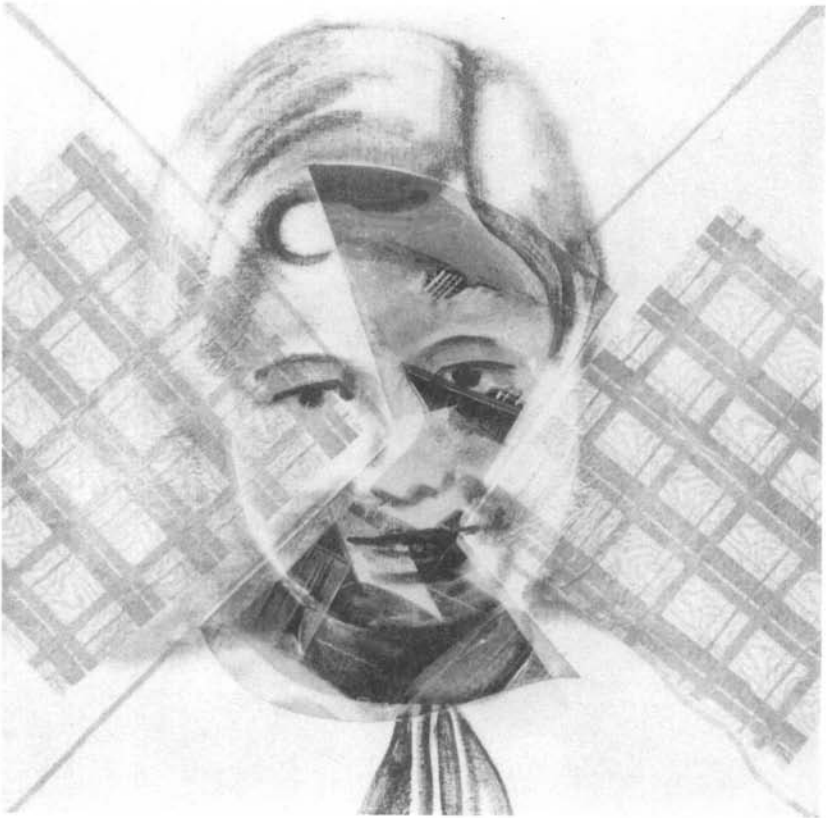

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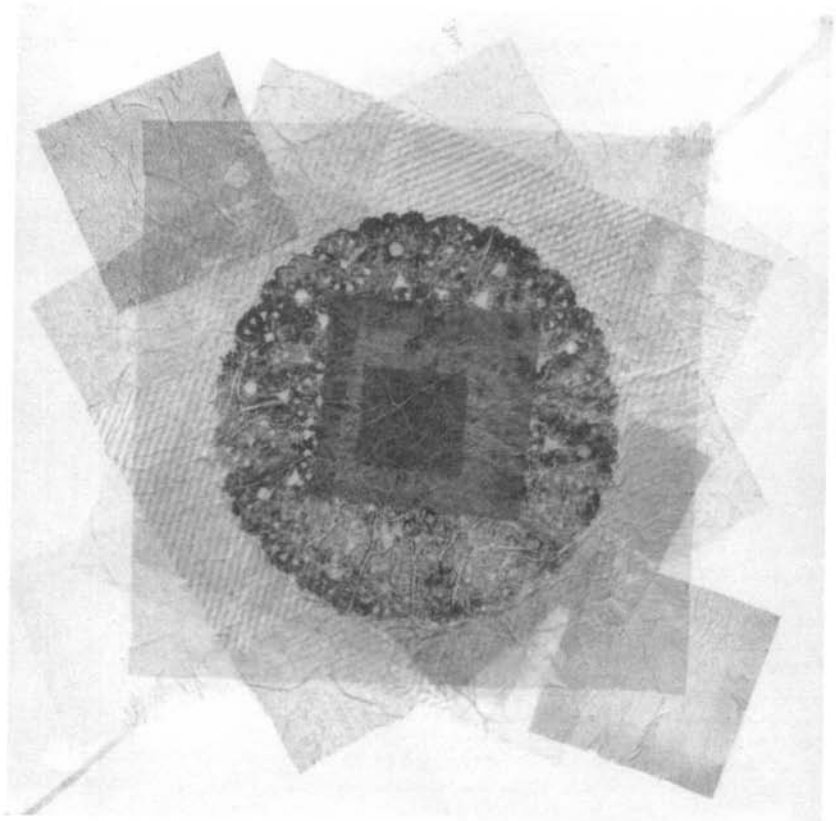

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Page one from the first draft of Mark Helprin's A Soldier of the Great War.

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Mark Helprin

The Art of Fiction CXXXII

For Mark Helprin the world has always been an abundant source of tales of high romance and beauty leavened by the occasional absurd detail.

As a young man, Helprin's father traveled in Soviet Asia as a purchasing agent, buying sheep entrails for sausages for his family's food processing business, and then became involved with American and British intelligence, leading to a close association during World War II with "Wild Bill" Donovan, founder of the Office of Strategic Services and the CIA.

Helprin's mother, Eleanor Lynn, a Broadway leading lady of the thirties, is the daughter of Max Lin, a Jew from Sinkiang

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Province, China; she began her career at age eleven, when she was recruited into a child acting troupe, and played, among other roles, that of the Chinese princess in the original production of Pearl Buck's The Good Earth.

Helprin himself attended a number of graduate schools, served in the Israeli army, the Israeli Air Force, and the British Merchant Navy, and for a large part of his life earned his living by working at various occupations—as an agricultural laborer, a Pinkerton, a manuscript editor, teacher, factory worker, and the list goes on.

The New York Times Magazine, *faced with this checkered experience and noting, perhaps, that Helprin once told a reporter that he was raised by a dog, published an article that questioned his veracity. Shortly after its appearance, Helprin undertook a three-month, ten-thousand mile, fourteen-city tour of the United States in a Volkswagen Westphalia van—not solely to publicize his just-published novel,* A Soldier of the Great War, *from which he never read, but also to refute the* Times *piece, point by point, brandishing affidavits and documents. Some of these are reproduced here.*

Helprin was born on June 28, 1947, in New York City. His career as a fiction writer began when, soon after his graduation from Harvard, The New Yorker *bought a story he had written while sitting on the grave of Henry James in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He is the author of* A Dove of the East and Other Stories *(1975),* Ellis Island and Other Stories (1981), *the novels* Refiner's Fire *(1977),* Winter's Tale *(1983) and* A Soldier of the Great War *(1991), as well as a children's book,* Swan Lake *(1989), based on the ballet, and illustrated by Chris Van Allsburg.*

Each of Helprin's books has met with praise from reviewers, but the most extraordinary critical response may be Benjamin DeMott's admission in reviewing Winter's Tale *for the* Times Book Review*: "I find myself nervous, to a degree I don't recall in my past as a reviewer, about failing the work, inadequately displaying its brilliance." Such praise aside, Helprin negotiated for himself a long-term contract for three novels, a story collection and a book of nonfiction—an arrangement that*

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many consider remarkable in its generosity and inclusiveness.

Helprin, a senior fellow of the Hudson Institute, is also a contributing editor of The Wall Street Journal, *in which he published extraordinarily prescient analyses of political and military strategy prior to and during the Gulf War. He now lives in Seattle with his wife, Lisa, a lawyer, and their two children. His introduction to his wife came after he noticed that a copy of his own book,* Refiner's Fire, *and a book about petroleum geology that he had ordered, had been placed together on the Scribner's will-call shelf. He asked to see* Refiner's Fire, *and discovered that it had been ordered by a woman who lived next door to him on Riverside Drive. When, shortly thereafter, he announced himself over her building's intercom, she was reading the book, and, living in New York, assumed that someone of dubious motivation had been peering through her window with a telescope. She greeted him in the lobby carrying a large butcher knife.*

This interview was conducted by letter and over the telephone between New York and Seattle. During the process, the interviewer expressed regret that he and the author had never met. Helprin promised to stop by when he was next in New York. An afternoon coffee was suggested. "Oh no," he said. "I've never had a cup of coffee in my life. I can't even remain in the same room with coffee. You know, it's funny you should mention it, because my next novel is about a man who, though he is condemned to live in Brazil, feels exactly the same way."

INTERVIEWER

Why don't you like to give interviews?

MARK HELPRIN

When I was young it was impossible to stop me from talking about myself, but I now find it difficult to start. As an adolescent (which stage in life took me to about the age of thirty) I had a facile tongue, a prodigious memory, and an all-consuming fear of sociality (a fear and distaste that is, if any-

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thing, stronger now than it ever was, but now I am disciplined enough just to suffer through it, and, quite frankly, I'm tired of trying to keep back a sea of discomfort with the flood of my own words).

The source of my aversion is partly hereditary, in that my father and many of my relatives were much the same, and partly an acquisition that I owe to my early upbringing. When this was far more serious a matter than it is now, I was born two months prematurely, with malformations of the spine (spina bifida) and lungs, and what was later diagnosed as "hyperconvulsive neurological syndrome." Whatever that is, it was sufficient to have kept me out of the United States Army, though not the Israeli infantry and air force or the British Merchant Navy.

To make a rather long story extremely short, I spent many weeks in an incubator, came home as damaged goods, and spent much of my early life in the throes of respiratory diseases that kept me out of school and apart from others. As a small child, I once ran a fever for, literally, a year. I had pneumonia half a dozen times, double pneumonia, whooping cough—all because of the circumstances of my birth.

Now, combine that, and all that you can imagine might flow from it, with the place in which I was raised—Ossining, New York. Culturally, the character of the area was formed during the Revolutionary War, when it was a no-man's-land between the Americans and the British, and every criminal, deserter, and malcontent for hundreds of miles found his way there and left his genes. When I was a child, I would always look at people's hands, to see if they had six fingers, and sometimes they did.

My draft board, I am told (although it may be myth), had, of all draft boards in the United States, the highest proportion of men killed in Vietnam—where, incidentally, my godfather, the photographer Robert Capa, was the first American to die, though he was a Hungarian and had nothing to do with the Hudson. The area was salted with military institutions—West Point, military academies, veterans' hospitals—and old soldiers, including even, when I was young, some from the Civil

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War. The play of the boys was guerilla warfare in the extensive woods. Every stranger was a threat, an enemy. Indeed, there were a lot of bad apples around—escaped convicts from Sing Sing (twice as I remember), standard criminals, gangs in the fifties, child molesters (a beautiful little girl was taken from my third-grade schoolyard and raped and beaten over a period of many hours) and hoboes (not Shakespearian woodwinds) on the rail line that was the geographical locus of my childhood. I ran wild through all this, protected by my paranoia, by my sharply honed guerilla skills, and by a rather extensive arsenal. Had you turned me upside down and shaken me, the floor would have looked like a military museum after an earthquake.

INTERVIEWER

I was asking about your dislike of being interviewed.

HELPRIN

Interviews, yes. For various reasons I was not socialized in a conventional manner. Nor, having gone to elite schools (that once gave slightly more than lip service to nonconformity), was I forced at any time to adjust. The writer's profession used to be such, anyway, that one did not need to learn to be a member of the herd. In fact, when I entered upon the field in the early sixties, individualism, such as it was, was the dominant orthodoxy. This was then forced to compete with the idea of the collective, and now the idea of the collective, albeit in tribal subdivisions, is the orthodoxy. And I, in the space of a generation or two, am as outdated as a fountain pen—something with which, by the way, I accomplish my labors. I used to write exclusively with one particular Montblanc fountain pen, although lately I have had to use a roller-tip fountain pen, because I find it harder and harder to control the fine muscles of my right hand during prolonged periods of work. I buy boxes of Deluxe Uni-ball pens, use them until they start to drag and then change. If a pen starts to drag, I lose nervous control and find that I bear down on the paper so hard that I put holes and rip channels into it. It's a condition

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that has become progressively worse since childhood, when it gave me a handwriting problem that my teachers ascribed to sloppiness. (What an irony, given how I have always driven everyone crazy with my compulsive neatness. When I was very young, I used to clean up after my parents. If I stay in a hotel, I make the bed and clean the room when I get up, even the bathroom mirror, for which I carry a tiny bottle of ammonia.)

INTERVIEWER

Once again . . .

HELPRIN

Yes. An interview is like social discourse, something that makes me profoundly uncomfortable mainly because it is shrouded in conventions designed to keep people apart and obscure the truth. I have a few very close friends, and I enjoy working with people in any number, which is different: you can be both more private and more direct simultaneously. I've always said, for example, that the best way to meet a woman is in an emergency situation—a fire, an earthquake, a flood, a battle—and that I would rather go to war than to a cocktail party. That, however, is not the whole of it. I like to be in control—perhaps because I understand very clearly how easy it is to lose control, to end up in a camp, to succumb to illness, to lose the ones you love. In an interview, I lose control even of what I am, for it is the interviewer who edits me, finally, into what he thinks I am, and never have I been happy with someone else's version of my life after that person has spent an entire two or three hours fathoming it.

Not that I myself am capable of compressing what I have seen and felt in a lifetime into an interview, which, admit it, one is supposed to be doing. If that were not the case, you would be querying me on something other than myself—say, the political economy of landlocked states, or the ideal profile of the post-Cold-War navy.

INTERVIEWER

Well, rather than that, why not a literary subject?

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HELPRIN

Because I'm a writer and not a literary critic. I was always totally uninterested in literary criticism, even though writers are supposed to be, as a signal of their devotion and well-roundedness. You know, "Not only is Joshua X. Belasco a well-received novelist and the recipient of the Golden Falcon of the African Literary Congress, but he writes erudite critical essays in the *New York Dime Book Review*." For one, Joshua wants to let everyone know that if they write a bad review of his next book, there he is, writing erudite reviews for the *New York Dime Book Review*. It's no less sophisticated or delicate a form of deterrence than wearing a pistol in Tombstone. And then Joshua wants to be taken as an intellectual: he knows instinctively that writers are not intellectuals, so he attempts to blur the difference.

INTERVIEWER

Why can't writers be intellectuals?

HELPRIN

It isn't that they can't be, but, rather, that being an intellectual is not sufficient, and too many "writers" these days think it is. This is because art has for so long been subsidiary to science, and the creative impulse for so long subsidiary to the critical facility. Why should a baseball player want to be a sports announcer, or why would an actor want to write movie reviews? Far be it from me to criticize my contemporaries (Isn't that what Idi Amin said?), but this impulse makes no sense unless you consider that so many writers these days are not really writers at all but intellectuals doing what they think writers do.

INTERVIEWER

Could an interview indicate whether they are writers or intellectuals?

HELPRIN

No, their writing would. Interviews are fundamentally overreaching. They don't convey the nature of the subject even

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when they are unedited transcriptions. And if, God help you, you submit yourself not to a portraitist but to an abstractionist, you're finished, because what comes out is his idea of you rather than you yourself.

This happened to me quite recently, for the first time in hundreds of press pieces over several decades, and it has made me shy forever. Last year, *The New York Times Magazine* ran a piece about me that has caused me a great deal of trouble ever since. Many people now treat me with open disdain, and others have told me that they were extremely reluctant, after that article, to make my acquaintance. And who could blame them? The *Times*'s central thesis was that I am a liar. Along the way, they strongly suggested that the items on my resume (so to speak: I don't have a resume) are fabricated, and that I am cowardly about upholding my beliefs in public. They did so by innuendo, by contrived and inaccurate juxtaposition, and with false statements. The most troublesome thing in the world to prove is that you are not a liar, because any piece of evidence you marshall in your defense is suspect. Still, I fought in the press, and my case is on record. It would take a long time to walk you through the whole thing, but I would like to air a few choice examples just to illustrate the facts. It was said, for example, that I made up the incident in which I was nearly killed in Jamaica when I was thirteen years of age. But it was the God's truth. I don't know why they refused to believe me, or why he said that I changed the facts of the incident (because I never did), but after the accusation I obtained a signed statement from the physician who saved my life. Here it is. You may run it if you wish. Why not put it in a box? [See facsimile of document on opposite page.]

Then there was the business about the British Merchant Navy, in which I served briefly while I was in college. Actually, I should have known. Twenty years ago, I was for a time a graduate student at Princeton. In a seminar I was forced to attend that I think was entitled "Variations of the Romantic Self" (now you see why they had to force me), we read *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,* and after we reached the line that reads, "The water, like a witch's oils,/Burnt green, and

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A. A. Chaplan, M.D. Ph.D

April 29 1991

Dear Marko

During the summer 1960 I was summoned by your father to attend your wounds following an assault. The local doctor (Munley) was off duty, (It was a Sunday) You were bleeding profusely from a head & leg wound, and would have exsanguinated had they tried to move you to the hospital some 40 miles distant.

I was able to staunch the flow with improvised tourniquet & by direct access to the head wound using hemostats, tie off the artery. . .

The first page of the physician's statement provided by Helprin to document that he was nearly killed in Jamaica at the age of thirteen.

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blue and white," the professor said, "Here we have to pay particular attention to the symbolism, for the obvious reason that the sea cannot look like that."

"Yes it can," I said. "Of course it can." How do you mean? some epicene students asked, though not in those words. They must have asked this question in snaky, coily, slimy words, of which any ten in a row would put me to sleep like a tank truck full of chloroform. "The sea sometimes looks like that," I said, "and sometimes writers forswear symbolism and ingenuity for the sake of description and conveyance, which is a perfectly fine thing to do, for the world is a miraculous and beautiful place." But the sea, they maintained, does not glow. Oh yes it does, I insisted, and proceeded to describe the bioluminescence of the Sargasso Sea. I don't think they knew much science, and they seemed to be unacquainted with bioluminescence. How did I know about this? "I've seen it," I reported. Where? "In the Sargasso Sea. I was a sailor in the British Merchant Navy. Come to think of it, *just like the ancient mariner*! It was the season of hurricanes, and we had diverted the ship into the doldrums to escape a storm. . . ."

Well, *The Times* didn't believe me, either. If only they had said, prove it, I would have tried. In fact, when they ran the article I tried very hard. My ship was the M.V. *Stonepool,* out of Hartlepool. After calling all the shipping companies in Hartlepool, I located someone who remembered the *Stonepool,* now long gone. He referred me to various maritime agencies, and, after an astounding and difficult chase (like most of my family before me, I do not speak Welsh), I found the crew records in a warehouse—in Newfoundland. *The Times* was unable to do this, I suppose, because they don't have the resources. All I had to do, on the other hand, was call up my Newfoundland bureau. Here are the records. You may run them if you wish. Why not put them in a box? [See facsimile documents on opposite page.]

INTERVIEWER

They think you toy with the truth.

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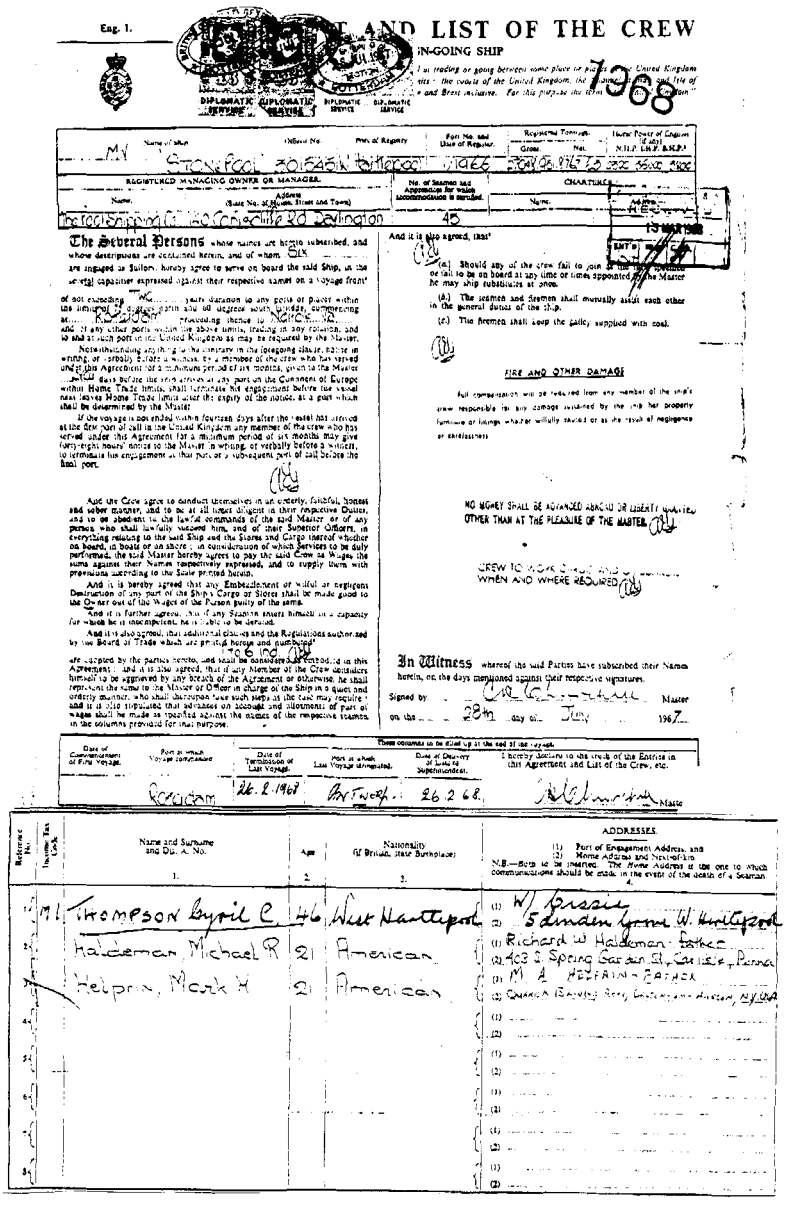

Eng. 1.

AND LIST OF THE CREW

IN-GOING SHIP

DIPLOMATIC SERVICE | DIPLOMATIC SERVICE | DIPLOMATIC SERVICE | DIPLOMATIC SERVICE

M.V. STONEPOOL | 201585 | Hartlepool | WATES | 1968 | 976 | 352 | 1968

REGISTERED MANAGING OWNER OR MANAGER

Name: The Constantine Shipping Co. Ltd. | Address (Street and Town): Constantine Rd Darlington

No. of Seamen and Apprentices for whom accommodation is provided: 45

CHARTERER | Name: | Address:

The Several Persons whose names are hereto subscribed, and whose descriptions are contained herein, and of whom SIX are engaged as Sailors, hereby agree to serve on board the said Ship, in the several capacities expressed against their respective names on a Voyage from of not exceeding [illegible] years' duration to any ports or places within the limits of the Seas, Straits and Oceans bounded, comprising at [illegible] proceeding thence to [illegible] and to any other ports within the above limits, trading in any rotation, and to ship such port in the United Kingdom as may be required by the Master.

Notwithstanding anything to the contrary in the foregoing clause, notice in writing, or verbally before a witness, by a member of the crew who has signed under this Agreement of a minimum period of six months, given to the Master [illegible] days before the ship arrives at any port on the Continent of Europe within Home Trade limits, shall terminate his engagement before the vessel next leaves Home Trade limits after the expiry of the notice, at a port which shall be determined by the Master.

If the voyage is not ended within fourteen days after the vessel has arrived at the first port of call in the United Kingdom any member of the crew who has signed under this Agreement for a minimum period of six months may give forty-eight hours' notice to the Master in writing, or verbally before a witness, to terminate his engagement at that port or a subsequent port of call before the final port.

And the Crew agree to conduct themselves in an orderly, faithful, honest and sober manner, and to be at all times diligent in their respective Duties, and to be obedient to the lawful commands of the said Master, or of any person who shall lawfully succeed him, and of their Superior Officers, in everything relating to the said Ship and the Stores and Cargo thereof whether on board, in boats or on shore; in consideration of which Services to be duly performed, the said Master hereby agrees to pay the said Crew as Wages the sums against their Names respectively expressed, and to supply them with provisions according to the Scale printed hereto.

And it is hereby agreed that any Embezzlement or wilful or negligent Destruction of any part of the Ship's Cargo or Stores shall be made good to the Owner out of the Wages of the Person guilty of the same.

And it is further agreed that if any Seaman enters himself in a capacity for which he is incompetent, he is liable to be landed.

And it is also agreed, that additional clauses and the Regulations authorised by the Board of Trade which are printed hereon and numbered [illegible] are accepted by the parties hereto, and shall be considered as embodied in this Agreement; and it is also agreed, that if any Member of the Crew considers himself to be aggrieved by any breach of the Agreement or otherwise, he shall represent the same to the Master or Officer in charge of the Ship in a quiet and orderly manner, who shall thereupon take such steps as the case may require; and it is also stipulated that advances on account and allotments of part of wages shall be made as specified against the names of the respective seamen in the columns provided for that purpose.

And it is also agreed

(a) Should any of the crew fail to join the vessel or fail to be on board at any time or times appointed, the Master he may ship substitutes at once.

(b) The seamen and firemen shall mutually assist each other in the general duties of the ship.

(c) The firemen shall keep the galley supplied with coal.

FIRE AND OTHER DAMAGE

Full compensation will be required from any member of the ship's crew responsible for any damage sustained by the ship her property furniture or fittings whether wilfully caused or as the result of negligence or carelessness

NO MONEY SHALL BE ADVANCED ABROAD OR LIBERTY GRANTED OTHER THAN AT THE PLEASURE OF THE MASTER

CREW TO WORK [illegible] WHEN AND WHERE REQUIRED

In Witness whereof the said Parties have subscribed their Names herein, on the days mentioned against their respective signatures.

Signed by [illegible] Master

on the 28th day of July 1967

These columns to be filled up at the end of the voyage.

Date of Commencement of this Voyage.	Port at which Voyage commenced.	Date of Termination of Last Voyage.	Port at which Last Voyage terminated.	Date of Discharge of Crew at Termination.	I hereby declare to the truth of the Entries in this Agreement and List of the Crew, etc.
	Rotterdam	26.2.1968	Antwerp	26.2.68	[illegible] Master

Reference No.	Income Tax Code	1. Name and Surname and Dis. A. No.	2. Age	3. Nationality (If British, state Birthplace)	4. ADDRESSES (1) Port of Engagement Address, and (2) Home Address and Relation. N.B.—Both to be inserted. The Home Address is the one to which communications should be made in the event of the death of a Seaman.
1	M	Thompson Cyril C	46	West Hartlepool	(1) W/ Grassy 5 London Lane W. Hartlepool (2) Richard W Haldeman - father
2		Haldeman, Michael R	21	American	(2) 403 S. Spring Garden St, Carlisle, Penna
3		Helprin, Mark H	21	American	(1) M A HELPRIN - FATHER (2) CAMP ALGONQUIN, Berry, Lackawanna County, N.J. 07405
4					(1) (2)
5					(1) (2)
6					(1) (2)
7					(1) (2)
8					(1) (2)

Crew records from the M.V. Stonepool *provided by Helprin to document his stint in the British Merchant Navy.*

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HELPRIN

Then there was the business of juxtaposition. At one point, the interviewer writes, "When I ask him why he toys with the truth, he offers a response, replete with metaphor, that he's obviously considered beforehand." He then quotes me explaining to him why it is that I "toy with the truth." The only problem was that he never asked me that, and my answer (which I had not considered beforehand) was given in response to his query about a passage I had written in a novella—"Ellis Island"—ten years before: "Truth is not anchored to the ground by driven piles. It can float and take to the air; it is light and lovely and delicate. It is feminine as well as masculine. It is often gentle, and, sometimes, it can even make a fool of itself—but when it does it calls down God (who protects weak creatures), and suddenly its foolishness becomes a blazing, piercing light."

INTERVIEWER

You were upset . . .

HELPRIN

Among other things they implied that I was reluctant to go on record about my political beliefs. But I go on network television at the drop of a hat, I'm a columnist in the largest newspaper in the United States, and I spoke to that interviewer for five to ten hours about politics, withholding nothing, answering honestly, and barring no topic, which, I suppose, means that I'm not a politician. And if I'm supposed to be hiding, why is it that, ten years ago, *The New York Times Book Review* ran an article to announce that they had discovered a Republican who wrote belles lettres? And why is it that the first sentence of *The New York Times Book Review* front page review of *A Soldier of the Great War,* a book about an Italian soldier of the First World War, reads, "In the late twentieth century, where do you fit a writer who has described himself as a 'Roosevelt Republican'—Teddy Roosevelt, that is, he of the Big Stick?" Has *The New York Times Book Review* ever run a review before, or since, in which in the very first sentence

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they identify the major-party political affiliation of an American writer? Would it have been necessary to have included in the first sentence of a review of *Ancient Evenings* the information that Norman Mailer is a Democrat? I'm not even objecting, it's just that I want to make clear the conditions in which I must operate.

I had an extensive and respectful correspondence with the *Times*. I enclosed documents. I begged them to listen to the transcripts. They would not run a correction or a comment. Their response to me was essentially to tell me to drop dead. That is the main reason that I don't like interviews. It is because I do not like to be betrayed.

INTERVIEWER

And why don't you give readings?

HELPRIN

I think it's more or less dishonorable to stand up in front of a few hundred people and read from a book. So I give a lecture, a speech, or a recounting of stories instead. As I think it's dishonorable to give the same speech, lecture, or recounting of stories twice, I have a lot of work to do. Last year we went on a fourteen-city book tour, and I nearly died. Presidential candidates have speech writers, and even *they* constantly repeat themselves. In addition, on this tour, since I didn't want to go by plane, I drove ten thousand miles. My wife and children were with me. We camped, and we stayed in five-hundred-dollar-a-day hotels. The contrast was instructive. I went to the White House and met the president, which was actually a lot of fun, even if no one dares interrupt him, which I found entirely frustrating. We have four-wheel drive and could get way off the road. Once, we were having breakfast in the mountains of southern Utah—forty-five degrees in late June—when a bunch of real cowboys drove a huge herd of cattle right around us. The cattle were lowing and kicking up dust and bumping into our van, and the cowboys were whistling and cajoling and slapping their ropes against their saddles. We ran out of gas in Montana, and my four-year-old

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thought we were all going to die right then and there! I attended a six-hundred-person reception for me at the University Club in New York, where I was the only one who didn't get to eat even a single shrimp of the thousands that had sacrificed themselves in my honor. The real Roger Rabbit showed up at a reading in Los Angeles. We swam in the Atlantic, the Pacific, and a rooftop pool high above Chicago. I went canoeing on the Hudson, and we cooked our dinners by cold rivers in Idaho and Montana. In Las Vegas we took the children into a casino to teach them an object lesson about gambling, and were unlucky enough to win. It was extremely interesting. What else can you say about a trip where you stay in a hotel where they call a doorman "*Chasseur!*" What else can you say about a trip where you meet Margaret Atwood, George Bush, and Roger Rabbit?

INTERVIEWER

You don't like to give interviews, or readings. You're obsessed with privacy. What about your relations with other writers? Do you write blurbs and reviews?

HELPRIN

I remember standing on a rock in the water at Woods Hole, talking to my father-in-law, an eminent biochemist, who was expressing his gratitude at being part of the great community of science. Although I understand the benefits of community—for one thing, it enables you to take pride in the accomplishments of others, so you are relieved of the terrible burden of ambition—I don't partake of them. I am excluded, and I exclude myself, for a number of reasons. One of them is the nature of the community in which I work. Before my first book was published, I gave it to John Cheever to read, with the hope that he would review it for *The New York Times Book Review*. I still have the contract for the book, a slim volume of short stories published by Alfred A. Knopf, who, at the time, was still paddling about the hallways of the institution after which he was named. Even though the first printing was only five thousand copies, I had appended to the document a table of

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royalties that accounted for sales of up to one-hundred million. I managed to sell three thousand copies of the first edition, which was not as good a performance as I had anticipated. My hopes lived on, however, as I had not had the opportunity to market the work in India, China, South America, Africa, or Russia, not to mention Indonesia, Japan, and many other places where, all told, billions of people make their homes to this very day.

I assumed that Cheever would read the book, think it was magnificent, review it in awe, and that it would therefore be placed on the front page of the book review. This, needless to say, would help in boosting total sales toward the one-hundred-million mark—although, I must admit, I've been on the front page many times now (though I may never be again), and sales have not been quite that robust.

He did read the book: he had no choice, he needed our swimming pool. And he did like it and told me so, after which I spent several days raping my calculator. One of the things I was going to do with the money was to buy the New York City Police Department (don't kid yourself about the feasibility of that) so as to be able to redirect their efforts toward fighting crime rather than living with it. I was also going to see if I could buy Grand Central Station, which I was going to make into the world's most magnificent studio apartment. Can you imagine my shock when John, dripping wet with heavily chlorinated water, told me that he was not going to review or even offer a quote for the book?

Maybe he just didn't like it, but what he told me was that he had a book coming out, and a friend of his had a book coming out, and they were going to assist one another. This, he said apologetically, precluded his efforts on behalf of anyone else's work, so as to maximize the impact. I was struck by a double lightning bolt of anger and shame. Anger that things were like this and that I was excluded, shame that I had hoped to do exactly what it was that had suddenly been done to me. It was no less a stunning lesson in the falsity of the system that judges and promotes books than it was in my own vanity and weakness of character.

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I vowed at that moment, spurred on, as is so often the case, by shame, never to review a work of fiction, never to quote for a book (once, I allowed a letter to be excerpted in which I described the author of a very fine book, but not the book itself), never to serve on a prize jury, never to participate, in short, in trading favors—and I never have. Most people who encounter one writer's recommendation of another, whether in an advertisement in the press, on a book jacket, or in a review, assume that they are witnessing an act of altruism spurred by a disinterested love of literature. Undoubtedly that is sometimes the case, but my experience over thirty years has taught me that most of the time these things are simply exchanged—like wampum—and that in addition they serve as a tool for keeping one's name in front of the public without actually paying for it. If you are presented as an arbiter of taste, it really can't hurt you the next time around, can it? In this system, the ideal posture is one of noblesse oblige. The participants want to put their generosity on display as much as their fellows in politics want to make public every ounce of their compassion. It's good business, and it explains why Vinic Totmule says of Joshua X. Belasco, "Joshua X. Belasco is perhaps the finest writer in English today," except, of course, for Vinic Totmule, and it then goes on to explain why Joshua X. Belasco is quoted all over the place as saying, "Vinic Totmule writes in white-hot prose."

INTERVIEWER

Are there consequences from taking this stand?

HELPRIN

Simply by abstaining from this kind of behavior, I have alienated so many people that at least I'm famous. No creature hath the fury of a writer who extends himself and does not receive payment in kind. One, who was extremely influential, even told me that he was going to "crush" me. You mean historically? I asked, and he replied no, in the present. I told him, falsely, that I lived for history, and that I would only care if he crushed me historically. He retreated to try to figure out

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a way to do this, but died before he found a solution. He was angry at me because he had read in *The New York Times Magazine*, long before it committed its most recent and truly unpardonable sin, that I did not read living writers. This despite the fact that we had spent many interminable, boring hours while he was, technically, alive, discussing his many, interminable, boring books.

I like foreign writers more than I like American writers—that is, contemporaries—even though many foreign writers are extremely silly, faddish, ideological, politicized, neurotic, unhealthy, publicity-courting, pack-running narcissists, too. The reason American writers are like that is that they cling desperately to being writers, and they see themselves as martyrs whose letters will be read in schools someday after the world reforms itself according to their principles. As I do not feel that I am fighting for a place in history, I do not have to maneuver myself to the front of every photograph. I am content not to win prizes, not to be accepted in the society of my fellow writers, not to be a member of PEN, not to be elected to the American Academy of Insects and Orthopedists, or whatever it's called, up in Washington Heights.

INTERVIEWER

Does not one detect a twinge?

HELPRIN

A remembered, habitual twinge. A phantom twinge, perhaps. Not only am I content, I actually enjoy it. Once I left the precincts of bitterness and ambition, I found my reward in being able to concentrate fully on the thing itself—the book, the story, the article. I had always been able to concentrate, but now I have greater equanimity. My isolation is also partly political. In the early eighties I wrote a perhaps influential article in support of missile deployment in Europe, in response to the massive rollout of SS-20s and other Soviet missiles. I'm proud of that article, because I believe that this issue was the last test of the policy of containment, and that, in passing it, we called the last bluff of the Communist world

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before it collapsed. In short, I am convinced that, had we not, we would have had more Brezhnevs and no Gorbachevs or Yeltsins—not, mind you, that we are out of the woods, but that is outside the scope of this interview. Anyway, the article did not sit well with the Left, and I caught a lot of flack. But I never heard from any of the people who had sent it my way, after the Soviets returned to the negotiations. I never heard from them when the INF Treaty was concluded. I never heard from them when the Zero Option took effect. And I never heard from them when Soviet Communism collapsed and the people of the Eastern Bloc turned out to have been more anticommunist than even, dare I say it, Republicans.

INTERVIEWER

How are you received in academic circles?

HELPRIN

As you might imagine—given that I am absolutely sure of the now heretical proposition that you cannot judge a book by the race or sex of its author. And you can imagine how well I and my work are received in academic circles, when I assert plainly and without apology that deconstructionism, like Nazism or Stalinism, is less a system of thought than a sign of mental illness. In 1975, I went to visit Roger Rosenblatt at *The New Republic* in Washington. He had been one of my teachers at Harvard, and Marty Peretz had been a tutor in Kirkland House, where I had lived briefly a decade before. Roger reintroduced me to Marty by saying, "You remember Helprin, don't you? From the asylum?"

He was making a joke that then came true. I had always wondered what would happen to people who spent six to ten years laboring on a five-hundred-page tome entitled *Vaginal Motifs in Etruscan Beekeeping*, and now I know. They go stark raving mad, and then they get tenure. In an accident of history, the American university system mistakenly modeled itself after the German rather than the English and then distorted even that. The greatest sin in American academia is to make a generalization. That's why Oxford and Cambridge seem so

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civilized in comparison: there, they recognize that life, history, even the deeper currents of science, are terms of art. Here, on the other hand, you spend the best years of your life grinding away at vaginal motifs in Etruscan beekeeping, and when it comes time for independent thinking you're about as ready as the lid of a garbage can.

I don't want to beat a dead horse to death, and I do want to return to your line of inquiry, so let me say in summary that relativism and politicization have so smothered the universities and the world of publishing that to state, as I do, that it is possible to serve universal ideals and appeal, non-politically, to the fundamental needs of human nature by addressing its fundamental questions, is perceived as heresy. The end and the beginning of it is that I dissent from the dominant orthodoxies that cradle the profession I practice, that, despite what some assert, I have never been shy about it, and that, therefore, I find myself not only out of the mainstream, but playing the role, at times, of moving target. As I have an activist nature, I fire back. I confess, even, that I have often opened fire before being fired upon, as I would, for example, were I to come upon a platoon of the SS or terrorists about to attack a school.

INTERVIEWER

Doesn't this lead to overwhelming practical difficulties? *A Soldier of the Great War* was conspicuously overlooked for awards and for the *Times* list of notable books. Does that bother you?

HELPRIN

Of course it did, but only briefly. First, you may recall that I have mentioned shame in answering one or more of your questions. I have a very high quotient of shame, and I believe in the existence of honor. Even though the magazine piece that questioned my honesty was false in itself, I was ashamed to be taken for the kind of person it portrayed. If you had a reputation for writing bad checks, despite the fact that you had never written one in your life, you would feel very bad every time you took out your checkbook.

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And yet, I feel myself responsible for everything that happens to me, even if I'm not. That's just the way it is. So I feel that the reason *A Soldier of the Great War* didn't get any prizes is that it just wasn't good enough. True, the reviews were so extraordinary that they were suspect. How many times can one be likened to Tolstoy without questioning the standards of the age in which people write this about you? And Germans, too, no less. On an intellectual level, I might wonder about this prize business, the crux of which is that I don't grease anybody, but, emotionally, I feel that it was my fault. *And therefore,* subject to my control. This is what enables me to wade through these minor adversities. The difficulty that most leads to alienation and despair is powerlessness, and I do not feel powerless. Why? Well, it is within my power to write a better book than the last (not that I always will, but I can aim at it). It is within my power to understand the circumstances in which that book is received. It is within my power to put temporal glory in perspective and to order my priorities according to what is fundamentally, even eschatologically, important. Having done so, being left off a list of notable books becomes somewhat less than a mortal wound.

Second, what you mean by the practical basis, I assume, is the ability to make a living and find satisfaction in one's work. I have always had another profession. Only of late, in the last hundred years or so, has the world economy become rich enough to support a specialized caste of writers. Most writers have always had other things to do and done them well. I noticed a long time ago that writers who did nothing but write were generally a sorry lot of self-pitying neurotics, and that by contrast, Shakespeare, Milton, Dante, Chekhov, Yeats, although they may have had their troubles, usually had another iron in the fire. I believe it was Flaubert who said something like, "Live like a bourgeois, so you can write like a wild man." I see the opposite of that these days, and also that passion is reserved for politics and reason for literature, when it should be the reverse.

Anyway, I set out to follow an alternate profession. I went to graduate school to study political science and history. I

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experienced the full spectrum, starting at Harvard, where, despite a general atmosphere of petty insanity, I must admit to finding a very impressive synthesis of the German and English approach. I then lurched to Oxford (lurch, by the way, was the word), where they do beautifully in writing history as literature, and finally thudded down (perfect way to describe it) at Columbia, where the political science department is so quantitative that students who lacked math just sat there like Cabbage Patch dolls.

At present I'm a senior fellow of the Hudson Institute (where I work on military questions pertaining to the Middle East), a senior fellow of the Discovery Institute, and a contributing editor of *The Wall Street Journal*, where I write for the editorial page. These are wonderful places staffed by brilliant people, and my association with them (the antecedent of *them* being mainly the people) more than makes up for anything I may forego by being of a different species than that of my literary brethren.

I may be ostracized, but there is no organization to it, so I do manage to keep busy. We're moving to a farm, and I go to bed at night thinking about alfalfa—not the character in *Our Gang*, but the vegetable. Helping to raise my two children is the best and most valuable thing I've ever done, and I'm right in the midst of what have been increasingly wonderful years (don't forget, I'm home all the time). Mix this all up with piano lessons, walking in the mountains, finishing my next novel, writing newspaper columns, making an occasional speech, managing a household and being married to a lawyer who is a lot taller than I am and very beautiful, and you have a full life.

INTERVIEWER

How important is financial security for the writer?

HELPRIN

As with everything else, you're ruined by either too much or too little. The question remains, how do you define what is too much or too little? One of the most beautiful phrases

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in the Hebrew liturgy is *Daienu,* which is pronounced "die-ainu." It means "enough (for us)," and in the song that is sung at Passover, the idea is that God has given much more than we require. Among other things, this allows us not to waste our lives in continual pursuit of *more,* and suggests that we should decide what it is that we truly need and then learn to stop wanting.

Of course, this idea flies in the face of materialism, for, in the practical application of materialism—as the current state of the United States illustrates—you can never have enough, and your goals are set not according to an understanding of what is needed but rather only in competition with others (yet another downside of relativism). I have enough. I have always thought that I have had enough, even when I lived in one room ten feet from the railroad tracks, in the Bat Galim quarter of Haifa, and my first wife and I had to share a bathroom with fifty Russians, Turks, and other refugees. And why was I content with what I had in that objectively somewhat difficult situation? Simply because, in light of the real suffering that sweeps continually over the world and always has, in light of the forces that, for me, find their most startling expression in the Holocaust, how could I not be content? How could I be affected by—you brought it up—being left off the list of someone's favorite books?

INTERVIEWER

What kind of reception have you had from foreign audiences? Do you work with your translators?

HELPRIN

Sometimes the translators send me several pages of questions, but, other than that, I can't see how I possibly could work with them. I can get along in half a dozen languages, but I can't write well in any of them. If I could, I wouldn't need translators. In some languages, such as Japanese or Hindi, it's a major accomplishment just to figure out which letters make up my name. As for foreign reception, it varies by country. England has always been a disaster for me, despite the fact

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that I have long been interested in English history and was, of course, carefully marinated in English literature. I do not reject the English, but they will not have me. It has always been that way. I think I know why, but it is better left unsaid, because it is mystical.

Everywhere else is much better. In Germany, for example, they take me so seriously that each time I have a book published there I really sit up and take notice. Of course, they take everything seriously, but in my case I think they've really gone overboard. Sometimes I wonder what I've done wrong, but I do appreciate it. If nothing else, it helps make up for the short shrift I get in England. What an irony.

INTERVIEWER

Why did you start writing?

HELPRIN

A question like that can be answered on many levels. I was alone most of the time as a child, and I have always detested the idea of imaginary friends. I had so few friends and so little experience with people that I probably lacked the ability to imagine what they would be like. Also, I was aware even then of the undesirability of imagining into place something that you lack. It's weak, and it distracts you from remedies. Nonetheless, I had to do something, so I began to live what is lamely called an inner life. By the third grade, my teacher would regularly take me aside and take dictation, recording stories that, although well presented, were largely spin-offs from and sequels to *Stuart Little*. Despite my apparent lack of originality, I must have had something going, because Herb Alexander, who was at Simon and Schuster, wanted to publish my small-person stuff and also commission a child's biography of Abraham Lincoln, whom I revered as a saint (and still do). My father knew enough to stop that, as he was married to my mother, who had been a child actress.

Now skip ahead a bit, and I will tell you a story that *The New York Times Magazine* would never believe, but to hell with them. In the summer of 1964, having just turned seven-

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teen, I went to Europe. In Aix-en-Provence, I wanted to impress a girl from my school who was staying there in an exchange program, so I arrived at her doorstep on a rented motorcycle. Although years later we were almost married, I did not impress her at all, and spent the day listening to her longings for someone else. Well, I got out of there as quickly as I could, but, given that it was my first time on a motorcycle, perhaps too quickly. While on my way back to Marseilles, going forty down a steep hill, I lost control, somersaulted ahead of the bike, and then felt it land on top of me. We both slid for quite a distance along the macadam, and the impact was enough to separate the front wheel from the frame, although it may have been that the front wheel had simply come off, causing the spill in the first place. I got up, put the wheel back, and shimmied down the road, covered in blood and shredded clothing.

A police emergency van stopped and offered assistance, which I refused because I was operating on a New York State junior license, that did not allow me to drive abroad. The gendarmes never would have known, and as I drove off in a state that would have meant imminent death to anyone but an adolescent, they had the most extraordinary expressions. Anyway, I went back to my hotel and grew very ill. After several days, I was delirious, and found myself being treated by an Algerian doctor, in an Algerian neighborhood, that, for all I knew, could have been in Algeria. He gave me a tetanus shot in the stomach with a needle a foot long. I don't know how much time I spent there, but as soon as I could I left, and staggered through the streets, finally making my way to the old port, where several ships of the U.S. Sixth Fleet were docked. I collapsed upon the gangway of the destroyer *Robert A. Owens* and awoke in its spotlessly clean sick bay, with a corpsman stitching my wounds.

Having read many novels in which invalids discover themselves in Switzerland, I went there to recover. Unfortunately, I looked like the dog in *The Stranger,* and learned that people covered with scabs and lacerations are generally not well received. I suffered one of the greatest humiliations of my life,

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in a little mountain town where an innkeeper took a lot of my money and sent me off with a girl to the "annex" of his inn. We walked and walked, with the girl carrying my knapsack because I was so weak. I kept asking where the annex was, and she kept saying, "Ahead, ahead." Finally, we got to a steep grassy bank that descended hundreds of feet. There, she unceremoniously pitched my belongings into the air, and I watched them roll down the slope into oblivion. I couldn't believe this, and was further surprised when she pushed me, too. To make a long story short, by the time I crashed into a stump, all my scabs had been abraded away by the hillside. What misery! What humiliation! A girl, no less, in Swiss folk dress. But I was not down for the count. I returned to the inn and wrecked the bar by throwing tin beer trays like Frisbees. After a short beating ended by the arrival of the police, I was taken in disgust and put on a train for—where else? —Paris.

Ah, Paris! I arrived newly scabbed over. How magnificent it was in those days. My first memories of it are from 1950, when I was a small child, and in fourteen years it had changed very little. Now it is a modern city, with an entirely different feel. I went to the Sixteenth Arrondissement, Passy, where I checked in at the Hotel Gavarni, on rue Gavarni. Each time the proprietor showed me a room, I rejected it because I said it smelled of burning rubber. I ended up on the top floor, suffering a stench that no one else could smell.

That evening I went to dinner in a restaurant across the street, wondering who was burning tires in Passy. I had such a terrible headache that I thought I was going to collapse. My eyes could not focus, and everything looked like it was under water. By the time I went to bed, I was rocking back and forth and groaning in agony. I felt as if someone were pulling out my eyes. My body was twitching. The nausea was unbearable. As I fell asleep, I thought that perhaps I would never wake up.

But I did wake up, in the middle of the night. I reached over and turned on the light, which was blinding but caused no pain. I realized then that I had no pain whatsoever, that I was floating in an aura of light and strength. The amazing—and, to me, still inexplicable—thing is that it was the first time

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in my life that I had been free of pain. I had never known what it was like to be free of pain. As my breathing was almost undetectable, I thought that perhaps I had died. I got up, sat at the desk and stared at the blotter. In the absence of pain, I began to write on the blotter. As I did so, I lost track of what was up and what was down. I seemed to be revolving in space, without either gravity or time. I have no idea how long I was at this, but I eventually went back to bed.

When I awoke in the morning, I felt as if I had never been sick in my life. On the blotter, in my horrendous handwriting, were several paragraphs describing Hagia Sophia, in Istanbul, where I had never been. I read them and was astounded. Not by what seemed to be the veracity of the description, but by the quality of the prose. I thought that it could have been written not merely by an adult, but by a real writer. It had the force, compression, and beauty of that which is written by someone who really knows what he is doing. Never before had I even come close to setting down anything like it. I had exceeded myself by so far that I was stunned, and as I read the short paragraphs over and over again, I felt such satisfaction and joy that I knew I had found my profession for life.

Since then, the feeling has been much the same whenever I put a pen to paper. I lose the world, I concentrate so deeply that hours pass in an instant (for years I used to think that something was wrong with my clocks), and I emerge calm and strong. I do confess that when I hear people complaining about what a struggle it is for them to write, and how writing a novel takes years off their lives, I am bemused, for were it not for the process of setting down words on paper, I'm sure that I would have died long ago. This may partly explain why I am content to continue without the standard feedback. I get my reward right at the well.

INTERVIEWER

It's hard to imagine what you've described as being standard procedure for how to become a writer. Are your present-day habits as idiosyncratic?

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HELPRIN

I'm always amazed at how often I'm asked that question, but I myself am always interested in the idiosyncrasies of how other people work, so maybe I shouldn't be that surprised. I write in either a loose-leaf notebook or on legal pads, both ultra-fine lined. It used to be that I would write a whole novel without a single correction, and then be faced with hundreds of pages of smooth text, unmarred, to revise when needed. After the death of my father that changed, and I now have a fairly marred text at the end of the first draft, though nothing compared to what I do when I rewrite. Then the original gets an overlay of tightly scripted corrections, lines, boxes, balloon additions, numbers referred to supplementary paragraphs and sections, proofreader's marks, punctuations, etc. It makes the Rosetta Stone look like a tabula rasa. That, I consider draft two. Draft three comes into being as I type draft two into a computer, making many changes as I go. I went to computers in 1982 and have been using them ever since.

Editing the hard copy of draft three, now in typescript, becomes draft four, another Rosetta Stone. That is entered onto the machine, again, with many changes, as draft five. This then goes to my editor, and taking into account her suggestions and adding my own further emendations, I get draft six. Copyediting and response—draft seven. Galleys, draft eight. And that's if everything goes smoothly. If it doesn't, throw in three or four more go-rounds.

When I'm not distracted by other things, I arise at 5:00 A.M., am at my desk by 5:30, and work until about 9:00. Then I run and do other exercises—rowing, gymnastics, weights—for about two hours. It used to be longer, but I'm now forty-five, and I can't run twelve miles every day. Then I read the papers and do the mail, which can take hours, take a nap if possible, and do a little work in the late afternoon before the day dissolves into dinner, putting the children to bed, reading, lights out. When I have a deadline, I just work all night and all day, like an architect on *charrette*.

Although my study looks a little like the cabinet room at Number 10 Downing Street, I can work as well on the steps

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of city hall or propped up against a tree in the forest as I can here. I become oblivious of my surroundings. Some people ask if it isn't too grand in here. My answer is that when I'm working, I don't have the slightest idea what's happening around me, and also that I'm the guy who was going to turn Grand Central Station into a studio apartment. The main floor would have been my work space. Can you imagine the cost of heating it? I was going to turn the lower concourse into a vast swimming pool, with slides, fountains, waterfalls, and brightly lit islands upon which you could climb to bask in the heat, surrounded by small forests of eucalyptus.

I'm sorry if I always go on at length and then respond to your question summarily, but the essence of the answer is that I work with a great deal of discipline, although I usually take on more than I can handle and often have to extend due dates. I have always been appalled by bohemianism because of its laziness, disorder, and moral weakness. I understand that this way of living is a response to the fact of human frailty, but it leans too far in one direction. Being a little more buttoned up doesn't mean that you'll get so brittle that you'll break. Nor does it mean that you don't understand tragedy, loss, and, most of all, human limitation.

I am more than well aware of those things, and I feel very strongly, but, on the other hand, I like to run ten miles and return to a spotless well-ordered room, and I like my shirts heavily starched. When I used to go on a long run on Sunday morning when I lived on the Upper West Side, I would pass thousands and thousands of people in restaurants eating . . . (I won't say this word, because I hate it so much, but it rhymes with *hunch,* and it's a disgusting meal that is supposed to be both breakfast and lunch). There they were—having slept for five hours while I was doing calisthenics and running—unshaven (the women, too), bleary eyed, surrounded by newspapers scattered as if in a hamster cage, smoking noxious French cigarettes and drinking Bloody Marys while they ate huge quantities of fat. They looked to me like a movie version of South American bandits. I would never want to be like that. I prefer to live like a British soldier.

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INTERVIEWER

What of your military background? Can you describe it?

HELPRIN

Although I studied intelligence and aerial photography, I served in the lowest rung of the infantry and in the air force in several field security groups. This was in Israel. I had already been in the British Merchant Navy for a short time, where I had been forever impressed with the British sense of responsibility, tradition and tidiness. The Israeli Army is anything but tidy, and although I was very pleased with its daring and its courage, I was always unhappy because of the form of things. Put it this way: the traditions of the Israeli Army are to those of the British Army what Tel Aviv is to London.

I first went to Israel in 1967, and I left finally in 1973. Though I have, really, the most extraordinary stories to tell about what happened there, I prefer not to tell them, and I usually summarize my experience by saying that I washed a lot of dishes and peeled a lot of hard-boiled eggs, which is true. It is also true that I have a lot of regrets and some moral confusion that I will never clear up—not about the enemy: it's more complicated than that. But, anyway, I served on the West Bank and on the Lebanese border. I drew combat pay, even though I am an only son and was supposed to have been kept in a rear area. Nothing happened that would have provided grist for Arnold Schwarzenegger, but that is precisely because the devil is in the details.

INTERVIEWER

Is that when you became interested in mountaineering?

HELPRIN

We were on an infantry training exercise on the West Bank, and my company, Company T, was supposed to take a certain hill. We bivouacked in a fig orchard and stared at it through our binoculars. It was ridiculous—no cover on the way up, no smoke, no armor, daylight, clear weather, fortified machine-gun positions at the summit. In short, no one would make it

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to the top. Our officers were delighted that I was going to get "killed," because in a previous exercise in close-in street-to-street fighting, I had embarrassed them by climbing up onto the roofs of the Arab village we were supposed to fight through, leaping the alleys and reaching their command post in three or four minutes. Expecting that we would take an hour or more to get there, they were totally unprepared, and I threw dummy grenades and sprayed them with faux submachine-gun fire, ending the exercise.

So, to take the hill, I begged them to use the strategy of the indirect approach, which was in the best traditions of the Israeli Army, but they would not, because they said the other side of the mountain was impossible to scale. Never particularly obedient, I convinced two friends to vault backwards with me over the stone wall against which we were sitting, and, lucky not to have been seen by the officers or betrayed by the enemies we had made within our own platoon, we were free to take the hill in our own way.

We skulked along the wall until we were out of sight, and then went down to a road. There, apologizing profusely, we nonetheless commandeered a Jeep pickup truck and had the Arabs who were driving it circle around toward the back of the hill, where they left us off and drove away in a daze. I had studied Arabic at Harvard, and been forced to learn the diplomatic language in modules that went like this: "Recently, the Soviet Union launched an artificial moon into orbit around the earth. The Arab peoples congratulate the peoples of the Soviet Union on the occasion of this great and peaceful achievement." I knew dozens, no, hundreds of sentences like this, but I couldn't even ask for a glass of water in a restaurant. Upon climbing into the truck, it all came back to me from the language lab in the basement of Boylston Hall, and I began reciting these things at high speed in between my directions about where to go. For two years I had memorized them and *Kalila wa Dimna,* which were animal fables, so my manic conversation was full of references to resolutions of the Arab League, crabs and ducks that could talk and were getting married and fragments from my exercise book, such as, "*Hadtha*

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kitaabun, kitaaby hooah hadtha. Ra-aitu hadtha. Inna, hadtha muhimun," which is translated, "This is a book, my book is this. I saw this. Truly this is important." The guy who taught me Arabic was really something else, and I had had engraved upon my brain sentences such as, "I met with the person who published this report about Cuba and understood from him that his writing of the report was very legal."

We left our packs and helmets at the base of the cliff, and took only rifles, a submachine gun, and grenades. The face that we climbed had been a quarry, and the rock was what climbers call "rotten." We didn't know the first thing about what we were doing, we were heavily laden with weapons, and we climbed fast so as to lessen the time in which we might have been observed from the top. I don't know how long it took or why I was not terrified, but I remember tottering on tiny holds and almost going over, and having my life depend upon the strength of a few blades of grass that I grasped when attaining a ledge.

We made it, however, and when we were safely off the vertical, discovered a Bengali sentry in a fortified redoubt, right in front of us. Luckily for us, he was facing the other way, his rifle was lying beside him, and he was combing his hair. I lifted him backwards and over the fortification, all the while keeping his mouth tightly covered and "stabbing" him in the chest. In figurative terms, he was extremely dead, but he was a cheater and kept on trying to scream. "Look, you idiot, you're dead!" we shouted in hoarse whispers as he tried to squirm away. It was only when we told him that if he didn't keep quiet we really would kill him that he agreed to shut up.

We then moved carefully toward the command center, where the referees were happily checking our men off lists as they were shot while making their way up. I remember becoming enraged when I saw this. Anyway, we threw our grenades and fired from behind a stone wall, all very quickly, and then charged them, spraying fire, before they even knew what was happening. Although we had killed them, the officers got really mad at me when I ripped down the flag and called to the rest of our company on the hill. I remember

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saying, half in triumph and half in fear of the brig, "What are you going to do about it? You're dead!"

That's how I got interested in mountaineering. That was in 1972, when it was beginning to take off in the United States. I started to climb in 1975—mainly technical rock climbing and occasional alpine climbing—and I've climbed in the Hudson Highlands, the Shawangunks, the Presidentials, the Cascades, the Sierra Nevada, the Dolomites, and the Alps. I was quite chicken most of the time and refused to lead anything more than five eight. I never took a leader fall, never peeled off even when top-roped. I must say that I loved it—the exposure, the technique, the mountains themselves. I retired in September of 1987 after reaching the summit of Mt. Rainier. I think that five people were lost on the mountain that year. (When I had tried to do the Matterhorn in 1983, I saw one of the—I think—fifteen men who died there that summer fall to his death right in front of me.) With two children, it didn't make sense anymore for me to continue.

INTERVIEWER

Could you talk a bit about characters, how they evolve in your mind, whether they change as the book goes along.

HELPRIN

My characters always seem to me, if not to all my reviewers, to be alive in the sense that they do things according to their own lights rather than just mine. I don't know how this happens, but it does, and from the first touch of the pen to paper the character has a life of his own that I cannot fully control. Peter Lake, for example, in *Winter's Tale,* is semiliterate, balding, middle-aged and until he is forced to do otherwise, lives comfortably with many protective self-limitations. None of these descriptions fit me except that I am now middle-aged, though I was not when I wrote *Winter's Tale.* Of course you probably hear several times a day from writers that they are surprised by their characters, but as the vitality of a character is the sine qua non of a story, it isn't surprising that writers whose work elicits your interest would say such a thing.

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I used to find it irritating, but now I just smile when book reviewers confuse my characters' views or behavior with my own. I suppose they are used to book after book in which an author's lack of talent imprisons him in himself, so they carelessly ignore the variety and competition among my characters and assume that each is a mouthpiece for me. Once, a minor character in *Refiner's Fire,* a psychopathic Irish mercenary, condemned cities and everyone who lived in them. Some hatchet-man of the moment took this as *my* view of cities, and wrote a politicized review in which it was but one of the sins attributed to me. All the while, I was living in Manhattan (where I was born), in the middle of years of work on *Winter's Tale,* a book which is, if anything, an ode to the City of New York. My meager resources—I survived mainly on turkey anus (which is not bad if you cook it right), and I would walk twelve miles rather than spend fifty cents on the subway—were devoted disproportionately toward buying books about New York, and day after day, obsessively, in the library of the New York Historical Society, I worked to fathom the city—in a labor, actually, of love.

INTERVIEWER

Is creating a female character a problem for you?

HELPRIN

No, and it never has been a problem, but in the same way that my characters are not politicized and do not jerk with the convulsions of the moment, my female characters have remained complex, varied, and often as faulted or idiosyncratic as their brothers, and as this does not fit the model of the "new woman" I am often taken to task by critics who berate me for not portraying them according to the contemporary line. Well, this line appears to me to have about as much truth in it as did Soviet Realism, and about as much artistic merit. Feminists want women to be a certain way, and it is a sin not to portray them according to dogma. Just try, for example, to put a woman in the kitchen in an illustration for a school text. I

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think that these days the penalty for that is probably death in what my younger daughter refers to as the "gas chair."

None of my characters was ever drawn to fit ideological specifications. So, when I do not conform to feminist realism I am berated. When someone thinks I do, I get paid off with praise that I do not want. The pity of all this is that a great character such as Ariane in *A Soldier of the Great War*—who is drawn to a large extent on the model of the *dolce stil nuovo* and the immensely complicated chivalric sensibility that gave Dante and Petrarch both context and inspiration—is not appreciated as fully as she should be, all because of the narrow blinders of the age.

INTERVIEWER

Is dealing with sex in a novel ever a problem? Why in the main is it done so badly by novelists?

HELPRIN

Why would dealing with sex in a novel be a problem? The trick, I believe, as with almost everything else in the world, is to keep it in proportion, to be honest about it, and to be modest. When a man and a woman feel love or infatuation, and the ethical codes by which they live permit it, they express it physically. Of course it can get quite intense—hyperventilating and wall banging and that sort of thing—but when it's over it's over, and you go on to something else.

I think the failures to which you allude can be explained by various complementary theories. Quite simply, if one has no sexual outlet, one will think about sex a great deal. Writers work in isolation and are generally thoughtful people who do not live to satisfy their desires the way people do in, say, Brazil. In addition, the literary culture is also one of failed marriages, odd neuroses, and ill health. If you combine all these things you get less sex than biology might require, and so you get musings driven by heat. I find, for example, that I tend to write about food when I'm hungry: it's only natural.

Another reason may be that, without an intuitive sense of what art is, many people use sex as a—forgive me—prosthesis,

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just as they use politics, to fill the emptiness in their understanding. And, of course, it sells, doesn't it, so it elicits a Pavlovian response in writers. It's like a pigeon pressing the right button and causing food pellets to drop down a chute. Throw in a few tumescent penises and "breasts like upright cones" and you can put in that new swimming pool or make your annual contribution to The Cat Wilhelmina Guerilla Unit of the Animal Rights Liberation Army.

INTERVIEWER

I see. Do you pre-plan a book before you actually begin? Do you know how it will end? How important is plot?

HELPRIN

I certainly know how it will end. In fact, I build everything toward the last sentence, which is the first thing that occurs to me in writing a book. It's like throwing a stone into a lake and then swimming and diving to fetch it. You can swim all over the place, you can dive and weave among the reeds, you can do anything you want, but when you finish, and you grasp the stone, the path between it and the place you start is a straight line. This "chalk line" is what I use to keep my intentions honorable, my plot simple, and my themes in reverberation.

Knowing the beginning and the end means that the middle is where the surprises are, where the characters and the book take on lives of their own, where the work becomes an adventure—but a disciplined adventure, because the ultimate purpose and the origin are known and firmly kept in mind. This fits quite nicely, in an aesthetic sense, with the notion that God does not play dice with the universe.

INTERVIEWER

I can't resist asking. Have you ever suffered writer's block?

HELPRIN

Never happened. Probably because I never had the sense that I was obligated to meet anyone's expectations other than my own (and I can forgive my own mistakes) or my father's

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(which were so demanding that he could never be satisfied anyway). Assuming that you are a professional and that you know how to write, why would you be unable to do so? If an electrician said, "I have electrician's block. I just can't bend conduit. I can't! I can't! I can't run wires! Help me, please!" he would be committed. One thing would be certain, and that is that his paralysis in the face of his work would have only to do with him, and not with his craft. I'm of the old school, I guess, and I would call writer's block laziness, lack of imagination, inflated expectations, or having-spent-your-entire-advance-in-Rio-de-Janeiro-and-taking-taxis-and-going-to-restaurants-you-can't-afford-before-you-have-written-a-single-word-of-the-book-you-pitched-to-a-cretin-with-an-out-of-control-cash-flow.

INTERVIEWER

A banal but important question: why do you write?

HELPRIN

I wasn't quite finished about mountain climbing. The best thing about mountain climbing was that it enabled me to go into truly wild places and see them from great heights that I had attained by great effort and despite great risk. I've written about this, of course, and I'm sure I'll continue, for my memories get deeper and stronger. With the grace of God, I'll be able to do with them what Norman Maclean did with his experiences in Montana. I share Norman Maclean's view of literature, although I did not discover him until about ten years ago, long after I had set myself to the task in which he succeeded so beautifully. The motto of my first book, intended to apply to everything that followed, is, "*amor mi mosse, che mi fa parlare,*" from the second canto of *Inferno* in Dante's *Commedia.* I translate it, "Love moved me, and makes me speak." Beatrice is explaining to Virgil why she is asking him to help Dante after he has fallen. I have always taken this as Dante's answer to the *Paris Review* question, "Why do you write?" And it is certainly mine.

I have no doubt, as well, that it was Norman Maclean's. Just

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think of the last line of "A River Runs Through It": "I am haunted by waters." Of course, you have to have read it to understand why it is his way of saying, "*amor mi mosse, che mi fa parlare,*" but he more or less verified this interpretation in a letter I have that, during the eighties, before Maclean died, was circulated almost like a document of the samizdat. It is from him to a Hollywood producer, and it reads, in part, "The story ["A River Runs Through It"] is . . . my love poem to my family, and in the end reaches into the blind world where one cannot help—does not even know how to try to help someone he loves until it is too late to help. . . . I waited until after I was seventy before I was sure that my hand and feelings were steady enough not to make a mistake in telling this story. No 'figures' in the world would persuade me to permit someone else to tell the tragedy of my family without my ultimate approval of the way my family and the way I feel about them are portrayed."

In 1977, the Pulitzer Prize jury chose to award the fiction prize to Maclean for *A River Runs Through It and Other Stories*, but it was overruled by the Advisory Board. That year, no Pulitzer Prize for fiction was given, and that year, to paraphrase Andre Maurois, it died (although the body sometimes stirs, such as when it embraced Bill Kennedy).

As for your question, I am asked it quite frequently, as you may imagine. In fact, it runs a close third to "Do you write with a pencil or a pen?" and "Can you make a living?" I always fail, out of politeness, to point out that the only people who are asked questions like these are prostitutes. No one asks professional water skiers, "Why do you water ski?" And I have never heard anyone inquire of a waitress or a park ranger if they are able to make a living.

When asked the why-do-you-write question, you are usually expected to present a fairly elaborate theoretical construct graced with ornaments of altruism that veer into politics. A lot of idiots will say that they want to "communicate." Intellectuals will lust to guide you through their theoretical construct, and you can bet that they'll have one. First, almost by definition, an intellectual must have a theoretical basis for those rare

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occasions when he takes action. Second, in a secular world, each artist is a mini-god, tasked with creating new universes between breakfast and dinner. It used to be that if one believed, like Dante or Shakespeare, one was content to imitate the beauties of life and the world, even to praise them. The artist's task was one of illumination and memory. Now it is one of creation, and look at the difference between, let us say, Mozart and John Cage, or Shakespeare and Samuel Beckett.

This modern impulse, that arose when lack of faith abridged the common language of mankind, has been mainly destructive. My proof of this is simply to contrast the art of modernism with the art that came before it. But even if you look kindly, as I do not, upon what I consider the wrong turn taken at the beginning of this century, you still may admit that each artist now creates his own frame of reference. That is supposed to be one of the glories of modern art, and it partially explains why the artist has been an intellectual: he has to spend most of his time explaining, in the new language he has invented, the new worlds he has created. The only problem is that compared to what we already have these newly created worlds are pretty thin.

If you don't operate according to the conventions of modernism, they write you off as a simpleton, for who but a simpleton these days would not have a complex code, entirely of his own making, that he is ready to flog in a diversity of settings and promote as if it were the political program of a very tiny special interest group? And these days the *artistes* are so exhausted that they can hardly come up with their wimpy little private codes, so they politicize their work—not only because they're weak minded but because they're too debilitated to do anything except follow instantaneous social currents. They simply don't know how, in the same way that it is unimportant whether or not Roy Lichtenstein *chooses* to paint like Raphael, because, whatever it is that he wants to do, he *can't* paint like Raphael.

Then there is the notion of progressivity, the idea that art, like science, is moving on a linear track and must always go forward—this despite the fact that the overwhelming charac-

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teristic of the universe is that its physical laws cannot be abridged, its materials and cycles stay more or less the same, and human history and development are stable enough so that we are just as moved by poetry (such as, for example, the psalms) written at its beginning as by a song written yesterday. If you credit the idea of progressivity, you will always have a facile but careless answer to the question, "Why do you write?" You will say, even if you bathe it in modesty, that you are doing your part to advance civilization. Please.

My answer, then, as you may have guessed, is very simple. I write in service of illumination and memory. I write to reach into "the blind world where no one can help." I write because it is a way of glimpsing the truth. And I write to create something of beauty.

One thing I can say is that I am quite certain that Mozart did not have a philosophical or theoretical justification and explanation for what he did. The music was obviously divine, and he went after it as best he could, which, fortunately for everyone else, could not have been better. You don't have to be Mozart or Shakespeare or Raphael to follow the same lead. But these days, to follow that lead you do have to be willing to go it alone.

—James Linville

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Three Poems by Karl Kirchwey

Trout Tank, Café Le Sporting

They are there in every weather
in my imagination,
as they were in the mountain town
where I was a student once,
in a café declared out-of-bounds
because of sex, drinking and dance.

They are nosing the cloudy walls
of the tank with their gaping mouths and flat
unspeculative eyes. Green and rose
smokes of blood and jealousies limber out
into rainbows, bent from their flanks' follicles
like eruptions of dumb adolescence,

rust or verdigris blooming on gunmetal's
unpolished curve. Sometimes, plastered
with leaves after autumn storms, the tank chills
the air into beads of pure longing
that run down in hesitant trails
and lose themselves at the bottom;

sometimes the snow is heaped up
in a shrug on the tank in December
like a hunched coat, set to ignore
small crises of feeling, abrupt
departures and all the numb rituals
that will hardly outlast the New Year;

sometimes, with its hidden source
of light, this world seems to tiger
the temperate faces of those

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who are waiting on the other side
of the glass, where the horse chestnut's candles
of flower and the twirling panels

depicting ice cream confections
in full color disguise the blind inquiry
that has lasted since my thirteenth year,
something that will outlast me,
something glimpsed through a bridal veil
of bubbles: a trophy, a dark gun,

a flush on the throat, a gleam of ruby
in the serpentine of the Gotthard
being worn down to the valley,
excruciating and slow,
ornamented by constant desire.
Something drifts; something waits pitilessly.

Aubade, Deer Isle

The pilot light shines up through each stove ring
with crowns of flame, hours before breakfast
on our last day. The refrigerator is purring;
the calendar is still turned to August,

six years ago (a Currier and Ives
rotogravure—"A Harbor For The Night"—
in which three boatmen contemplate their lives
around a campfire in the river's quiet,

their vessel pulled up safely on the shore,
their dinner warming as a cloud of smoke
billows to keep insects from where they are.
a piece of bread, some succotash, and talk. . . .)

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What is potential in life? What is static?
Dawn rises like a godhead newly come
across the endless drift of the North Atlantic,
past Gander and St. John, past the bald dome

of Cadillac and Mount Katahdin's knife-edge,
at last flooding the modest eastern wall
of our neighbor the lobsterman's cottage,
already painted a glad deferential

pink, as if the warmth of that rendezvous
lingered with memory and anticipation.
Light wakes, a child, before its parents do,
unreconciled to their complete exhaustion.

We sleep on into morning and ignore
the squirrel that shouts from the cleft of a tree—
a marriage still bedridden at this hour!
A mourning dove chants in the hoops of blackberry;

a blue heron patiently stalks the runoff
and cold mud, back this year from Florida,
his body a poised interrogative,
bleached shades lighter, it seems, by what he saw

down South. Meanwhile, out in the sagging barn,
freed from all human shackles and restraints
by the nocturnally clever raccoon,
garbage will be festooned in the strong tints

of its corruption, a black lace of plastic,
a gash of lobster shells, a smell of fish,
something to contemplate moon-eyed, ecstatic,
intent. And then we will get up and wash.

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Maps on the wall give soundings at mean low
water: shoals, islets, countless as the dried
blood-colored explosions of mosquito
left by some tenant on the fiberboard.

On the untended lawn, a little iron
grill limps on broken legs, its belly full
of ashes, like the gray and distant town
that draws us back with mild calendrical

imperatives, grateful for nothing worse:
weddings, appointments, a birthday.
It's breakfast time. For a moment we pause
and taste a hunger like expectancy

of something to be done before the year
is out, something that sleeves the running tide
in muscular crystal and, miles from here,
still sees that cottage turn its pastel side.

September, 1991

An Aside at the Met

(Attic krater, attributed to Lydos)

Hera, as you recall, once bore a son
so puny that she dropped him in disgust
off high Olympus, much as I read, just
last week, a teen mother dropped her child down

the incinerator chute to risk the blades
and fire that lay below. (His lusty cries
awoke the decent dozing operators
of the machine in time; he was adopted

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by the old lady living in 2A.
But I digress.) The blunt immortal babe
survived, grew, and in school did best at shop
(A+ for metalworking) to repay

her cruelty by fashioning a chair
whose arms would close around her and then lock,
making her briefly the gods' laughingstock
as she struggled. Though he fell like a star,

morning till evening, out of heaven to
dull Lemnos (this time Zeus gave him the heave),
Hephaestus limped back in a bacchic weave—
in just *this* lurching and wine-soaked review

or cotillion, done some five centuries
before Christ's birth, in black figure. You might
say pleasure learns to be immortal in it.
Now it is I who sink as gravity's

gold arms close round me, Dionysos potent
with wine and flutes, and sit. In '31,
as Docent here, I once taught Lewisohn
Dance School students. I have seen no more triumphant

reply to beauty, not before or since;
the class simply transformed, a chain of satyrs
and maenads wound through my puerile lecture,
their hands and feet raised, angled in the dance,

pressing at their humanity as though
it were an infant's caul, and with their fawn
glances, their bodies like tendrils of vine,
they dressed the mighty cheeks of that clay bellows,

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not lame humans, that moment, but gods, lambent.
The ancient Curator was passing by
just at that moment, saw their revelry
and cried, "Lydos! Lydos!" and "Excellent,

but badly lit!" then limped across the gloom
in search of a custodian to send
into the gray empyrean of paned
skylights. But her voice interrupted some

moment's divinity. It broke a spell
as surely as a teacher might clap chalk
dust out in clouds where coiled heads of Aeolic
papier-mâché columns wait in the dull

end of the day and the restless heads turn,
the black and gold braids of their thought fixed now
already elsewhere, on the vertigo
of pleasure, giving up the discipline

of what's created, as when each found shard
rose from the midden of the possible
and knit into curvaceous bloom, the vengeful
silence teased by approaching flutes a second

time— and a third. It lasts to our own day,
such rapture, gong-bright and gargantuan,
a heavenly joke, a dance, a festal throne;
then fades like all recovered symmetry.

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James Richardson

In Deer Country

They return in desirable colors of the season,
whether casually or stupidly, to simplify the garden
of its sweetest shoots and tips, though I have set out
dogbane and stinking tansy in a rage,
nightshade and fire thorn and bitter sprouts
and bepissed with the collusion of the moon
the glistening rows, so that half a county downwind
any pack of them, suddenly transparent
with hunger at a crossing, will feel as surely
as if they were in my heart that this is a land
too poisonous and overwrought to feed upon.
Yet since no vigilance, since vigilance conceals them,
or darkness, since no dark is dark to them,
can hinder them, the flowerhead loosening,
the red-green leaflet oilily unfolding,
and my curse, found tender, will be gone by morning.
They will tide, like sleep itself, over the shaved beds
to nip the rusty mums and the frost-breathed asters
within a handsbreadth of the sighing house,
where I stood once to declare *I have lived forever*
on this hillside, with its gaze-deep cover
and the stream the deer do not bother to step over.
My woods, as I watch, will clear into a park,
the old trees growing older far apart,
though I mortgaged for them both desire and memory
when I thought time was my only enemy.

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Three Poems by Michael J. Rosen

Watercolors

Knowing that Penn had dabbled, periodically,
in paints, noting the modest watercolor
of his young, late wife, above the files,
someone has leaned a catalogue by his phone:
Gli Aquarelles di Hitler,
Palazzo Vecchio, Firenze, with a note,
Gordon—you know he flunked out of art school?

Penn glances through the booklet. *München,*
Standesamt, Alt-Wien Ralzenstaat, Auersberg Palais.
The captions sound portentious as their subjects:
basilicas, blocks, towers, a plaza of walls—
less loving details than things accounted for.
The few inhabitants in that draftsman's province
(unrulier by far than mullions and bricks),

are dwarfed by statues. Stiffly swinging arms,
balanced on stiffened legs, their faces are blank
as the gradually vanishing windowpanes
(not one of *those* has a face peering out).
People supply, Penn figures, a sense of scale.
It's only when he inspects the artist's name,
A. Hitler, executed in the calligraphy

of invitations, does something sink in.
Essentially untrained, Penn's eye begins
to scan . . . for some preoccupation with red,
an early attraction for the Aryan, an obsession
with . . . with what? What can the paintings disclose
besides Penn's need to find the formative signs:
repressed, malignant—if only the next word

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might, somehow, have been *preventable.*
Surely the foreword explains; Penn runs down
the names below his intercom, Italian-
sounding ones, someone who might attempt
a rough translation. He finds, instead, no one
even born before the 1940s.
Could the caption below that wrecked cathedral

read: *Here is foreshadowed the ruins*
he was to create over all of Europe?
Back-to-back appointments, Penn resists
sharing the watercolors with his clients.
But why these, no better than the work
of some of his classmates at continuing ed.,
why these have been claimed as art—why this fails him.

Another View of Penn

During his stay, he catches glimpses of the TV's
glare, a black-and-white dim series
centered on his bed. OFF, the single station,
airs the story of a man, "Penn, Gordon Allen,"
recovering from surgery—minor. It's rather boring:
This guy drowses. The watched room, blurry

and often on the blink, is a spare studio
with props positioned for this week's scenario:
a sphygmomanometer, a transient's
empty dresser, a table with its small events
that slides above the bed and back
with the nurses and visitors—a designated track.

At the edge of the screen a doctor appears;
he is lifesize by the time he is near
enough to touch. Between the doctor and Penn,

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a body (numb, bandaged, drugged) is questioned
while—what's this?—a tray arrives: a plate
of sustenance, a foreign, lunar landscape.

A single taste is enough, a theatrical gesture.
He sleeps. Wakes. Flowers arrive: miniature
orange, anthuria, glads—all odorless
(thus painless) and then again, colorless
when televised. They block a window too high
to see out, besides. The only beam of sky

to cheer an impatient patient is faint
as moonlight, a painted ray from a portrait
of some Annunciation—this time, of pain.
Penn looks to the reflection to explain:
Does he feel any better? Can he be left alone?
Did he sleep well at all? Can he answer the phone?

The phone? Of course. *Hello*, he thinks. "310,"
a voice responds, as though Mr. Penn
had just stepped out a moment. (On the daily soaps,
it's the director on the line, calling with hopes
of prompting the episode-in-progress—
so says a nurse, pretty as an actress.)

On the remote control, Penn presses
the symbol of a nurse wearing . . . a nimbus?
(It *is* a Catholic—or is it Lutheran?—
hospital. *Health Center,* he means.) Summoned,
faith will be delivered by one or another face.
In that walk-on role one can replace

another, take vital signs, dole out pills
to make Penn healthy—at least, less ill.
Friends, some family—but all immediate—
visit each other from eight until eight.
Each one asks about the operation,
"You need anything? Want the news switched on?"

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"No," Penn shakes his head, pointing to the screen
where, he can see, he doesn't look convincing.
I look, he thinks. "Look," he says . . . "I'm dizzy."
Following his blank eyes to the blank TV,
the company insists he's looking better. But is he?
The series continues, though Penn will be released.

Expressions in Cement

The morning new cement is laid—at last!—
along the perimeter of Penn's remodeled highrise
(although the old had spalled, cracked and heaved
from frost and tree roots older than the building
the urgency arose only after
the super's mother's recent and fortunate fall),
the grounds are cordoned off with colored flags,
blocked with two-by-fours, sawhorses
and stapled signs that read

STAY OFF,
B & R
EXPRESSIONS IN CEMENT.

The mixing trucks and workers arrived at dawn,
slopped and smoothed the aggregate in forms
while all the occupants slept or overslept.
From Penn's hardly stellar, fourth-floor view
the vacant surface appeared like blank news-
print, delivered and spread as if to keep
the day's events from ever touching ground.
At breakfast, Penn recalls another site:
the only house he'd ever (had) built,

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a morning he and his wife took the children
to press their hands into the inconspicuous,
just poured, corner of the back porch:
their very own constellation of three,
five-pointed stars—falling stars.
But this building's hardly Penn's to print
(would any of the retired or nearly retired
residents want to be remembered
here—by whom?), nor is it Sean Latham's,

although his signature has been incised—
in broad daylight—on the still wet walk
when Penn returns from his more or less un-
inscribed, anonymous day. Penn kneels to touch
the sidewalk, damp and cold around the name,
and with the toe of his shoe, scrubs the letters
as if he *could* take time into his own
hands—feet rather, hastening
the trafficking days' erasing tread . . . but, no,

the scraping merely burnishes the name;
it's only Penn's rubber sole that yields.
Damn this Latham kid, leaving his lost
name as though he claimed—what exactly?—
besides his dashed-off delinquency:
the concrete? the highrise? the passer-by
who'll see this cast slab with its single name
and think, *Sean Latham, whoever you are*
or hope to be, have your head examined!

that is, for the next however-many-years
(all of Penn's for sure) until the ground
heaves and freezes however-many-times
and someone more important falls again
and the whole legacy begins anew
with a blank. *There's* immortality, Penn reckons,
taking the long way around the building,
and then there's *immortality;* we're passers-
by however it's expressed.

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Two Poems by William Olsen

Old World Light

Right on schedule, one century behind
The little bird on William Wordsworth's cuckoo clock
Emerged from Time Itself, a home, to cuckoo.
Even at midnight

You could clearly hear noon. And yet not even
In sunny Grasmere did any light come free,
Each homely chunk of coal was a commodity
Time Itself paid for;

Sufficient unto the night were the miners below.
Together underground William and Dorothy go—
They who paid a Light Tax on their ninth window.
No place like home, though.

The benches fly backwards, the newspaper readers,
As if they'd always been left behind so far
And what they were reading no one remembers,
Wheezing old men pulled

Straight into Nothingness which is not yet filled—
New islands of light in the Tube pounding past us,
People on platforms, years of practice, stare where
Our train is no more

So why do we care when the door accordions open
To some total stranger's paradise without us?
The angels of our century are hideous,
Brushing against us—

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This is as close as we get to blessedness.
Maybe in some last judgment of impending closeness,
Hands flat against glass, we'll smash through such light as
Futures all blackness;

But now each hand dusted with faery liver spots,
Each unlovely untied shoe, each overcoat
Striking a match, shaking dark a single face
Seems far away yet.

Hereafter

How beautiful and vast and bright and empty
inside the quick-stop's inextinguishable glow.
Night has just begun to have its say.

The being in the checkered frock is free
to read the tabloids with a face like a broken window
and dream of being known and extraordinary

and towel the handprints off a jar of murdered jerky
and feel like a moviegoer in the very last row.
Night has just begun to have its say,

the pickled eggs seem older than all creation this Monday
or Tuesday or Wednesday, and years from now
how beautiful and vast and bright and empty

it may feel to be alive and mildly happy,
to walk between the aisles of a brand new Stop-N-Go.
And when the century has its final say

may the tiny motels of our voices pray
that all the neon signs and wonders so
beautiful and vast and bright and empty
won't even fully begun to have had their say.

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Tony Sanders

The Warning Track

I

Baseball is the purest sport, meaning
ballparks out in the heartland, mixing
fork balls and slurves, tapping
slow choppers in a spring rain.
Winter locked us out, covering
the infield in aphasic snow, leaving
the bases sticking out like square tubers.
Summer surprised us, coming over the left field fence
like a shower of beer; we stopped in the entry tunnel,
and walked out in sunlight, into the bleachers,
and drank slowly, and studied the lineups.
"Batting third and playing right field, Ike Deutsch."
And when we were children, over at the neighbors',
my friend swung and accidentally hit me in the head.
And he was frightened. He said, Mary,
are you all right? And down I went
as if my head were a mountain, my body the sea.
I bled much of the night, and went home in the morning.

What are the hits that matter, what logic of numbers
rises from this dusty diamond? Listen, man,
you cannot say for sure whether it's ball or strike
when the catcher's in the way, and the bat swings,
and the full house is yelling, the temperature over 100,
and the corners of home plate obscured. Only
there is intelligence behind this steel mask,
(look into the eyes behind this steel mask),
and you can see something different from either
the pitcher's face leaning forward to read the signs

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or the seams of the ball as it breaks away from you.
Step out of the box and pick up a handful of dust.

Where have you gone
Joe DiMaggio?
Our nation turns
Its lonely eyes to you.

"You took me to the stadium first a year ago;
you said I was going to be an all-star.
—Yet when we came back, late, from behind the bleachers,
your hands dirty and your pants wet, I would not
talk, my skirt torn, I was neither
home nor away, and I saw nothing,
looking into the middle of the dash, but darkness."

Old Abdullah, famous oddsmaker,
didn't exist, nevertheless
is regarded as the best in the business
of wicked picks on points. Here, he said,
is your card, a 1951 Ralph Branca,
(Willie Mays was on deck. Remember!).
Here is the kissing bandit from Baltimore,
the lady of force plays at second.
Here is the man with three fingers, Mordecai Brown,
and here is the midget, and this card,
which is blank, can win you something if you scratch
off the surface. If you don't find
The Commissioner, you don't win.
I see bettors milling around the window.
Careful. If you see the one we call Brooklyn,
tell him I'll bring the results myself.
Tell him to be careful.

Shea Stadium,
under the light smog of a winter dawn,
a subway lumbered into the elevated station, a few
figures got off and started walking, though not many.

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Eyes above turned-up collars, hands in pockets,
each of them keeping distance from the next.
Pushed through the turnstiles and past the token booth
where a woman with fingerless gloves looked down
with the clock behind her unreadable under grafitti.
Saw someone I recognized from my neighborhood
and stopped him, saying, "Rudy, we did games together,
do you still buy cheap seats and move up to the boxes
or do you now pay? Want to go again next season?
Or do you no longer think of baseball in the bed of winter?
We could go back to where we dug under the fence,
although now it's impenetrable with poured concrete!"
I am one of you! You are one of us! You are guilty too!

II

The chair he leaned forward in was of well-worn leather,
especially the armrests where his elbows went,
when they weren't stretched out before him on the Formica,
or beckoning the cameraman in black headphones
to come out from behind a camera to answer a question,
the stadium lights reduced into one bright block
tripled in the blue-black glass of the zoom's outer lens
and the distorted silhouette of his own image included
as he was turned away from the microphone.
From the stands a synesthesia of sound and movement,
the panoply of color in distant stands an imitation
of Seurat one minute, and Pollock the next.
An enormous television screen in center field, a film clip
of a legend sliding slow-motion into second base,
shown three times, each increasingly larger,
until the frame froze on a foot, a base and a mitt.
Which dissolved into a close-up of a woman
walking awkwardly in high heels across the infield
to a microphone placed on the rubber of the mound,
the players nearby at attention, indifferent, at each bag.
Which dissolved into a close-up of a flag out in center
artificially fluttering in the still night air, as if at gunpoint.

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And the singer sang the song with an inviolable voice,
and some fans sang, some just mouthed the words
"O say does that . . . wave" to dirty ears.
And so many gestures from the garden of evening
appearing randomly from billboard to billboard,
under the ballpark lights, in the midst of noise,
the applause peppered with signs and slogans,
as the broadcaster looked out, and held his breath,
before he announced the orders, while looking ill.

"The stands are filled tonight. Yes, filled. Stay tuned.
The ballclub is out of the cellar. Stay tuned. Stay.
It's a beautiful night for baseball, don't you think?
I feel like they're going to change their luck, don't you?"

Anybody still left in his or her right mind
knows we're all going down the chute, n'est-ce pas?

"What's that?"
The airplanes circling La Guardia.
"That too, coming from the north?"
Traffic over traffic.

"It's not like it was. It wasn't like this. Do you
remember—"
Nothing.

I remember
checkers to the ballpark, the over and under.
"You remember Abdullah; there's nothing he
wouldn't—"
Debt.

Meanwhile the television over the bar,
and the radio speakers flanking the door.
"Maybe we should bag it. Like yesterday.
Give tomorrow a fair chance."
Aspirin at ten.

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And if the game is rained out,
we'll have no reason for going out,
looking out the window and waiting alone for the evening news.

When Charlie got laid off the first of the month, I said—
I s'pose I'd had a few, I said to him in his ear,
THE CONSUMER INDEX ROSE TWO TENTHS OF ONE PERCENT
we have a little to fall back on, plus what I've saved.
But I didn't want to go into that right off, didn't want him knowing what I had
as if I'd been stealing. Or hiding it from the sharks.
I couldn't stand watching him settle into the couch,
day after day so depressed, I thought, with the TV going,
"One Life to Live. Jenny Jones. As the World Turns. Oprah.
The Guiding Light. Geraldo. Sally Jesse Raphael. Donahue."
Tired of this routine with donuts and beer, I said,
get a life, you ought to be ashamed, you act like you're retired.
(And him only thirty-one.)
If you don't like it, he says in that voice of his, you can stuff it.
FIVE-DAY FORECAST CALLS FOR UNSEASONABLY MILD TEMPERATURES
And then, I can't help, hun. With that sad face I married.
I keep thinking there's a chance he'll get off the couch.
In the beginning I could perk him up with take-out.
(It's been weeks now. Maybe he should get on The Couch.)
Ever since he got laid off it hasn't been the same.
You are the enabler, I said to myself.
If you can't get him out of the house you've got to start thinking of your own preservation.
You didn't get married to take care of an invalid, did you?
LOCAL NINES MAKE DEAL
MORE DETAILS AT ELEVEN
It's after six thirty. Got to be going. Say hi to Phil for me.
Same to Bob. Call me if you need anything. I mean it, really.
Okay? Okay, thanks. See ya. Yea. Later.

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III

The avenue is quiet: the deepening whir of a taxi
slightly comforting as it glides to a halt. Here and there,
steam dances out of a manhole and disperses. The drunks are
in doorways,
curled up and crooked like tamped out cigarettes.
Even the wide *Os* in 'Houston' and 'Bowery' suggest someone
in no hurry to have the sweet fire in his stomach burn out after
a swig,
someone with eyes not of pearl, but of vitreous oyster
embedded in lidskin as black and lax as the labia of a stray.
The bell-rope that wakes up the city each day is busted,
the church's parapets obscured under workmen's netting.
Have empathy for the recalcitrance of the winter sun
on the other side of the eyebrows of old law tenements.
Have empathy for the old bones still willing to be warmed.

Gulls poked discriminatingly through the landfill
touching down and taking off again and again as if it were
too hot
as I drove one weeknight recently through the outskirts
going nowhere in particular with the radio off and window down
thinking about playing catch with my brother years ago
when we could still play pretend games for hours
on an abandoned diamond next to a scrap metal dealer
with rust colored rivulets running under the corrugated
partition into the infield.
The wince and shriek of twisting iron was deafening.
Once we looked inside and saw the purgatorial foreman
in a rubber coat and boots wading through a slush of water
and ore
and behind him a crane with a magnetic disk picking up
a wreck.

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I am one of you
you are one of us
you are guilty too
tra la la la la

Shea Stadium
under the light smog of a winter dusk
by the ticket booths near the north entrance
Monsieur Claude the merchant man
Senor Sir Cloud sold me two grams of coke
sight unseen, COD, only stepped on twice
he said, walking me toward the downtown local.

The only ignominy is old age,
the body as withering and insignificant
as a camphor ball in the back corner of a closet,
unless you do something about it.
Even if you do something about it.
There. That's better. And already it's behind you
with the velocity of a sentence you just said.
I get the distinct feeling we're all condemned
to lean our elbows on the second floor window sill
waiting for the world's kettle of water to boil.
O sure, there are the usual diversions,
the balms, salves and recipes handed down
slightly different from generation to generation
like the recuperation narratives they come with.
But that's just it. History shows up with a facelift
and shades, and nobody here can identify him.
Children tell time by schoolbus or the minute hand
of a mother walking them briskly off to kindergarten.
HURRY UP CHILD
HURRY UP CHILD WE'RE LATE
They are too young to be indifferent enough to life.
Think of how the heads of commuters all bob alike
according to curves and dips in the road they know by rote.

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Meanwhile, the romance of the skyline flies by unnoticed,
except when Him tells Her "that's the house that Ruth built"
trying to start a conversation before she gets off in Pelham . . .

The part of the day seeming christened,
and maybe chastened. The promise of
morning, the up-tempo of sunrise streaking
the shady bedroom is removed, is remote.
Why? Why does the sheet and pillow bower
of dawn always get stunned awake, then
tossed aside? What happens to the liquid
fear commuting from sleep to the surface?

The kiosk and straphandle and ledge of curb.
The abacus of oranges flowing out of a mart.
The cortical torture of a triggered auto alarm.
O City city, the fish knives of Fulton Street
de-bone and fillet on the other side of the river,
though the South Street cinema runs a replica
two blocks from the vangs of a stalled tall ship.
No sign of hasty caulking, no barnacles, no mold.

The music in the alley
and the music in the street
and the music in the subway
ain't the music in the heat.

Of course every boy has a sweetheart,
And some boys they have two or three.

White men, black men,
Koreans, spics and chinks
none of us can get along
so everybody stinks.

Of all the girls in this great city,
There is only one in it with me.

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Boom box, ball cap,
executive-style tie,
people in the city
never look you in the eye.

She lives with her folks on The Bowery
A few doors away from Canal,

Tristan and Wystan
where did you go?
You should have stuck around
till the end of the show.

And helps to support her mother
Does my little Bowery gal.

Yes, Walt,
what is it then between us
but always the sea and the railing railing railing.

The railing.

IV

X had been holed up in his study much too long
trying to put the finishing touches on his masterpiece.
Sooner or later he had to look up from his invisible escritoire
and summon the chauffeur for a drive in the country,
and maybe a stroll in the state park to cure his insouciance.
It's not that he put the desk in front of the wrong window,
(he had already experimented in all four directions)
rather that the unfinished oeuvre had made him a ghost writer,
despite the fact that he was the subject of his own work.
The excursion out of the city made him feel as anonymous
and insignificant as a footnote in the back of a lost tome.
There was something nostalgic about light weekend traffic,
the monochromatic veil of dreary buildings by the highway.

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It was as if it had been this way a long time and the landscape
of smokestacks and warehouses and parched ball fields
was hibernating or suffering from chronic fatigue syndrome.
Such spontaneous junkets did not go too far from home,
the apogee of these empty epics only an hour or two away.
The idea of going out and coming back from no destination
with someone else at the wheel was an alternative to breathing.

V

Data?
What about the data
we lost when we didn't press 'Save'
and a surge from the thunder brought down the system.
Could we regroup
and reconstruct the narrative as it was
complete with those spontaneous digressions we found
sitting together in the stands of an abandoned ballpark
one weekday in the middle of winter
and later leaning against the chain link fence by the dugout
looking at what was left of the almost eroded pitcher's mound
the rubber awkwardly exposed like a gum's last tooth
and later walking in the outfield with a history equally eroded
of teenagers backpedalling on the warning track
oblivious to the slant rhyme of subway cars
and later standing on the place where the plate used to be
and picking up a handful of dust.

Few places are as elegaic as ball fields in winter,
excepting perhaps old amusement parks by the sea in winter,
especially in a rain so light it does not fall so much as
materialize.
Isn't this how it is with inspiration,
a slight coating just enough to throw off your perception of
the familiar
and soon the whole landscape seems formal.

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Time is a terminally ill close relative of yours
and your impulse is to take a very good look at every feature
before you go
because tomorrow the bed may be empty.
And so, what is it? What are we meant to infer
from the almost imperceptively slow decline from stable to
serious to critical?
What was the doctor saying when we were in the hall?
Is sadness something we were supposed to get used to?

The beauty of the ball and mitt was that there was no clock,
everything being equal the game could have gone on forever.

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Achille Dogos

Kenneth Koch

1

The African (a Zairian man) spoke, sang, recited, wept, laughed, talked with amazing rapidity. He was performing for a large audience, but specially in honor of me and a few other visitors to Zaire, a work he had created about the politics, excitements, anguishes and ironies of World War II and the years just after. He took all the roles himself. At one moment he was Churchill, at another Eisenhower, at another de Gaulle, and so on. He was Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Konrad Adenauer, John F. Kennedy and all the other leaders of the wartime and postwar world. At the same time he was speaking, crying and singing, he darted around the room, turned his face, adopted different poses, lowered his head, threw his hands in the air, fell flat on his rear, scuttled across the room on all fours.

A good many of the connections of the act were made by puns—Hey ha ha, where you build a church? It's up on a hill, that's why we call it Church Hill! (Enter Winston Churchill) Did I hear my name? Going to strike the animal, strike it where it sleeps. We have to Hit Lair! Ho ho, speak. (Enter Adolf Hitler) Well I am Hitlair. Who now says my name. If

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then when my friend feels not so strong, he'll lean on me. He must lean on me! (Enter Benito Mussolini) Ho, I am Benito Must-Lean-on-Me. . . . Once introduced, all these characters acted out the wartime and postwar doings of their respective nations. This included the lead-up to the war, the invasions of Poland and of the Low Countries, the Blitz, Dunkirk, America's entry into the war, the Russian front, Rommel vs. Montgomery in North Africa, and so on and so on. The conclusion was an impassioned plea for peace by John F. Kennedy. At the end of it, he fell down—many spectators screamed—then got up as himself, Dogos, and bowed.

The performance lasted for about an hour. I applauded with all the strength I had left. The others on the podium applauded as well—enthusiastically, for a long time. I was weak from what he had done. I was also frightened, given the applause, that he might do it all again. He didn't, though. Instead, he bowed, graciously (the applause continuing), then walked over into a corner to talk to a friend.

2

The Churchill part was hard to figure out, but at last he got something that resembled (in Nogutu) an upper-class British accent. Adenauer was easy, the German accent was. American was hard, French was hard. Italian he thought he could fake. It was fun to figure out what the people would say. It was more than fun, however, his act. It was complete involvement for him and total exhilaration. It gave him the feeling that he had in his body—in his temples, his shoulders, his neck, his strong thighs, in his abdomen and in his vocal cords and mouth and throat—the entire true history of what went on in World War II and in the period after—this period so important for Africa. Period of independence and struggle. And of good leaders so hard to find.

When ready, he went to present himself, with much held-in feeling, at the Nomakin granary door. He had once or twice been in a theater, but it was usually in a place like this, made into a theater for the occasion. There was one he now thought

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of, outdoors, on the Congo Esplanade by the river, a rough place littered with sticks and pieces of stone. There was a risk there, if one were very physical, of getting seriously hurt. That performance, one of his first, had a great success; afterwards, however, he usually asked for a place indoors. The granary was crowded with spectators. He took a long breath, concentrating on being Churchill, and walked in—to board-thumping, screaming and thunderous applause.

3

Achille Dogos is walking by the River and he is listening to its sounds—*Agounaboupaboomba*. Here is the idea for a play all in one phrase. A goon named Boup invents a kind of music he calls Boumba. He plays it and thousands come to hear it by the river every night. In *français* the *Fleuve* says *un-con-aboup-aboumba,* more or less the same. Well, is a goon a *con?* Achille has yet another idea. Of course. And this idea is the River itself. The Congo. Or, else, modified, as in the sound he had heard in the river. The *Con*-Goon—which is what he will call it. Achille has now in mind firmly an idea for a play: The *Con*-Goon. A collection of foolish actions performed by two—one French, one American—characters, of course acted by Achille. This time he will be only two people. The Con-goon. All the noises in it will be the actions of the two fools.

4

Achille Dogos was puzzled when he received a copy of Edward Paunaman's long poem *The Lockets.* An American passing through Kinshasa had met and liked Achille Dogos, had thought he might like and profit from a little avant-garde American poetry, and sent him the book. Achille read it with great difficulty (it took him almost a month), and when he finished it he immediately began to work on ways to act it out. With the first ten pages, he did pretty well. He liked what he

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was acting, he thought he was feeling in his body the freshness and violent activity of the text. The long set of stanzas about the different kinds (some fantastic) and colors of subway cars stymied Achille for a time, but not for too long, for he found a way to get down on all fours and slide back and forwards while shouting them out. The slight narrative thread of the long poem—it was a parody of a ninteenth-century British girls-cum-aviators book kind of romance—delighted him and gave him ideas for many things to do. That and the grand, very grand, climactic whirl of the conclusion, which left him sprawling and exhausted, spread-eagled on the ground or, when it was indoors, on the makeshift stage.

The piece, for the wild energy of its performance—and given Achille Dogos's already great reputation, the love and esteem of which he had for a while now been the object in Zaire—this enactment of *The Lockets* became a "hit" and a standard part of Achille Dogos's repertory, wherever in his large country he went. Almost every educated person in Kinshasa had seen it, and many rather simple and uneducated persons too. Still, when Edward Paunaman won the Nobel Price, Achille Dogos didn't hear of it. Nor did Paunaman know anything about Dogos's performances.

Persons crippled by polio are permitted by the government of the Congo to go with free passage on the ferry boat across to Zaire and to bring back a certain amount of merchandise without paying customs duty on it. Many things not available in Brazzaville may be found in Kinshasa, and the helpless persons (mostly men) have great trouble making any money and satisfying their needs at home. Thus, this is a compassionate law. The boat almost every day (it crosses the Congo once in each direction every twenty-four hours) carries a surprising percentage of passengers in wheelchairs with crippled limbs. One of these, to his delight, has found someone to wheel him to a rare daytime performance by Achille Dogos. Forget, he thinks, the duty-free merchandise—he has to—the performance lasts all day. And he must be back in the Congo by dark (the ferry leaves at six). Today's show is a special one—a gala

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performance to celebrate the election of the new premier. Or, rather, of the same premier but from a new election.

The sun shines on Achille Dogos's body, as for the middle section he hurls himself to the floor and begins the passage of the "underground trains." This passage, to the cripple, Mouno Agoba, seems the very image of his sad and twisted life. For the first time since childhood, he bursts into tears. Paunaman, could he have seen this, might have struck at his heart with his hand and not known why it was there.

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xv. Purpose of rescuing humanity from its consequences of human crime + folly."
As a young man – ~~the Times of this~~ identity wrote ~~the~~ iconoclastic novels which swept ~~the~~ Irony off their feet for years of the TIME – the Head Looked with Sardonic ~~grief~~ SADNESS from ~~the~~ inside ~~of the~~ Ivory Tower of his mind on the antics of the World. During the great Cresendo of the ~~Second World~~ War, ~~he~~ years he retreated into a state of impotence + grief, HALF Turning His face away from what HAS Happening Horribly in the World (as so I believe) while he Himself was getting increasingly deeper into psychological experiment + Mystical Religion, while on the practical Human level he stretched himself to the utmost — daily EXHAUSTING, UNcongenial work in Film Studios to earn enough to give sustained Help to friends, Relations, among many refugees whose Life and reading were Daily bracket § the WAR.

A manuscript page from the novel Jigsaw *by Sybille Bedford.*

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Sybille Bedford

An Interview

Sybille Bedford's latest novel, Jigsaw, *was published in 1989 to great acclaim. It was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, and prepublication extracts of it appeared in* The New Yorker. *It was her first novel in fifteen years, during which she had written the biography of her lifelong friend and mentor Aldous Huxley and produced two volumes of travel and law reporting.*

She was born in Germany before the First World War and spent most of her early childhood with her father, who was by then an elderly and eccentric aristocrat, and who had withdrawn into a small château in a remote rural corner of Baden.

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Her mother soon bolted. After her father's death in the 1920s, Bedford split her time between England, where she stayed with Bohemian friends, and Italy and France, where she lived with her mother and Italian stepfather.

During the war Bedford lived in Los Angeles and New York and spent one year in Mexico. Her first published book, A Visit to Don Otavio *(1953), is an amusing yet highly serious interpretation of Mexico. Her first novel,* A Legacy, *published three years later, was based on the lives of three German families and has become a classic. It was followed by two nonfiction books:* The Best We Can Do, *an account of the trial of Dr. Bodkin Adams, who was accused of murdering his wealthy female patients, and* The Faces of Justice, *a "not quite straight-faced" reporting of legal practice in the law courts of England, France, Germany and Switzerland.*

Sybille Bedford is a vice president of the English PEN Club and a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, and she was awarded the OBE in 1981.

She now lives in a flat, with a small garden and a large plane tree, in London's Chelsea district. Despite her age and precarious health, Sybille Bedford's joie de vivre remains as remarkable as it is infectious. Her deep blue eyes are undimmed, and her fine complexion unblemished; she speaks with a tiny foreign intonation, now rushing through a torrent of words, now pondering and hesitating. As Valéry said, and she quotes, "la bêtise n'est pas mon fort" *("idiocy is not my strong point"). Her knowledge, experience and sense of humor made the occasion of interviewing her instructive as well as enjoyable.*

INTERVIEWER

In *Jigsaw* you speak about Jewish relatives. What is your religious background?

SYBILLE BEDFORD

My maternal grandfather was Jewish; I never knew him, as he died before I was born. Apparently there was a little more

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Jewish blood on either side of my family. I was born a Catholic like my father, but I wasn't very conscious of that. When we were living in our small château in the South, the village was entirely Catholic, and I was terrified by a naive kind of Catholic dogma: "You will go to hell if you miss mass on Sunday," and so on. . . . But my Catholic phase didn't last very long.

INTERVIEWER

How did you lose your faith? Gradually, or as a result of one incident?

BEDFORD

Oh, when I was about seven I was intensely shocked when the village people told me that my parents would be damned because they were divorcing. I was also worried about myself, realizing that we ate meat on Fridays and thinking about my first stolen cigarette. Then I told myself that it was all quite silly and unjust. That was the English idea that it wasn't *fair.* On the other hand I liked Catholic ritual. Not for long though. By the time of my first communion, I had been taught God was everywhere—and I thought why bother to go to mass on Sunday? I thought the whole thing was invented by people, and that was it. But fear of hellfire stayed with me for a long time—into my thirties or forties. I became very anticlerical; that is, I'm acutely aware of the extreme menace of religious fundamentalism. On the other hand I was very impressed by the mystical element in the last years of Aldous Huxley's life. Somehow he exuded sanctity; one felt the presence of something different. I have not had this feeling of otherness in the presence of any other human being, except possibly Yehudi Menuhin.

INTERVIEWER

Many people feel as you do about institutionalized religion, but the spiritual, mystical longing is very deep-rooted and looks for an outlet, as with Huxley.

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BEDFORD

I know. I often talked with Rosamond Lehmann, who desperately needed to believe in an afterlife where she would be united with her beloved daughter. I simply don't have it in me to lift the curtain. I think constantly about death; what happens afterwards I don't know. When you come round after you have had general anesthesia, you can't believe that several hours have passed. Death may be something like that. When I say that I think about death, I mean I love life and regret I have so little of it left. I love the world—the Mediterranean, the countryside, friends, wine and food, architecture, art, the riches of life. Why else does one write or paint, except to try to hold a little of that?

INTERVIEWER

In all your books you indicate that as human beings we are free and therefore responsible for our destinies. Yet at some point we take the wrong turn, and everything *dégringolades.* It seems to me that all your novels are about this crucial point and its consequences.

BEDFORD

We could also take a right turn, or let's say a better turn, yet there certainly are important moments when making the right or the wrong choice changes the course. This is the intellectual constant, and a device with which to sharpen in narrative what is diffuse in life. Why do artists appear to copy life? To bring it into focus and condense it. A novel is made of so many strands one doesn't know about at the time of writing. Then perhaps a reader points out something, and you realize he may be right.

INTERVIEWER

In *Jigsaw* you say, "The Aldous Huxleys and the Kislings are utterly themselves, the others—the German-Jewish sisters, for example—are a part of themselves: my mother and myself are a percentage of ourselves, and all are seen by myself at a certain

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time." How does it work? What is the proportion between memory and imagination?

BEDFORD

Most novelists write from experience, a few do not. Perhaps Melville did not in *Moby-Dick,* but the Brontës did. In *Jigsaw* I say that my grandfather's brother committed suicide, and my mother became a morphine addict. One would not invent such melodramatic incidents if they had not happened, unless of course one were writing a crime novel.

INTERVIEWER

And the brother's suicide also occurs in *A Legacy.* But after you work out the jigsaw of your life, you come to realize how it was shaped by your relationship with your parents. Your mother seems a monster, yet you loved her and bore the brunt of her selfishness.

BEDFORD

She was not a monster at all. I did not love her as a child. It was only when she fell in love with a very young and beautiful man and spoke of her foreboding that I began to love her. She said, "I know it cannot end well. One day you will understand the feeling that there is only one single human being in the world, and nothing can be done about it."

INTERVIEWER

One of those "choices" you mentioned earlier that determine the course of one's life.

BEDFORD

Exactly. She was remarkable: she taught me everything about reading and people and telling stories about people. She was very amusing and, of course, a writer manqué. That was a result of laziness and living for the day. She was not maternal, which I did not resent even then, but, alas, she had a fearful temper. She wasted many of her talents in talk and romantic love affairs. She died young.

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INTERVIEWER

You depict beautifully the artistic milieu between the wars, saying that the artists who lived in the south of France "took the wise decision of remaining in transit." Apart from the painter, Kisling, and his wife, Renée, who else lived there, in Sanary-sur-Mer?

BEDFORD

Aldous Huxley and his wife, Maria, built a house there in 1930. I had fallen for Aldous's novels long before I met him. He was a literary idol for me then, and Maria was one of the most extraordinary and most selfless human beings I have ever met. As things turned out, I was long on the fringe of their lives—when in London, I used to stay in their maid's room.

INTERVIEWER

Later in the thirties, there was also a German colony with Thomas Mann at its center. Did you mix with them too?

BEDFORD

After Hitler came to power Sanary-sur-Mer became a center of what my mother called *la haute culture*. Fortunately Thomas Mann was lecturing in Sweden when Hitler engineered the Reichstag fire; his elder children implored him not to go back. Because had he gone back to Germany, the Nazis would have had him in their hands. The two eldest children, Klaus and Erika, knew the French coast well because of their friendship with Jean Cocteau in Toulon. So naturally they directed their parents to the nearby village of Sanary. Immediately, droves of other German refugee writers arrived and settled in Sanary and Bandol for the few remaining years of peace. Around the Thomas Manns were his brother, Heinrich, and his wife—the model for *The Blue Angel*—René Schickele, and the Zweigs, Arnold and Stefan. They were the highbrows and had weekly readings of their works. Then there was another group, best-selling writers who made huge money: Lion Feuchtwanger, Bertolt Brecht, Bruno Frank, the great art critic Julius Meier-Graefe . . . Feuchtwanger's *The Oppermanns*

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was one of the first books on Nazism. It won the Pulitzer, but had to be shortened. He told me, "The publishers are giving me ten dollars for every word I cut!" He had to cut five or six thousand. Arnold Zweig was a very left-wing socialist and a great friend of Bertolt Brecht's. Stefan was far more smooth. Meier-Graefe was the art critic who discovered El Greco and van Gogh. The German art establishment hated him because he was not academic, but he wrote beautifully. His famous books are *Vincent van Gogh* and *The Spanish Journey,* about El Greco.

INTERVIEWER

What was Mrs. Mann like? Was Thomas Mann really a homosexual?

BEDFORD

Yes—it's supposed to be in his diaries. By the way, he once proposed to my mother, who always referred to him as "poor Tommy." He had six children. The eldest, Klaus, became a great friend of mine; he was completely homosexual. His sister, Erika, was also a declared homosexual and for many years lived with a talented actress in Munich. Later she married the homosexual actor Grundich, who became Göring's protégé and was made director of the German Theater. So she divorced him and eventually married Auden—who was of course completely homosexual—just to get a British passport. Klaus enlisted in the U.S. Army, had a very brave war and, disillusioned by the post-War world, committed suicide in 1949.

INTERVIEWER

Grundich's story is told in Szabo's marvelous film *Mephisto.*

BEDFORD

Yes indeed. But at one point Erika discovered that she really liked men, became involved with them and never looked at another woman. Mann's two middle children, Golo and Monika, were also close in age. Golo became an eminent scholar and academic. Monika married a Hungarian musician and

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tried to become a pianist. In 1942 the Thomas Manns thought that England was becoming too dangerous and persuaded them to come to America. Their boat was torpedoed and sank and Monika's husband drowned, but she survived. When the news came, Katja (Mrs. Mann) said, "We mustn't tell the Magician (her husband). It would interrupt his day's work!" She constantly protected him and referred to his "glory"—*Weltruhm.* You see she was from a family of eminent Jewish musicians and mathematicians. She and her twin brother are supposed to have had an incestuous love affair, which, in the summer of 1905, Thomas Mann put into his novella *The Blood of the Walsungs.* The Pringsheim family had it withdrawn at the last minute from the journal *Neue Rundshau,* in which it was to appear. The story, all Wagner and bearskin rugs, was finally published as a book in 1921. Katja had great stamina. The last time I saw her in Zürich, she had just returned from Japan where she had been to celebrate her twin brother's ninetieth birthday. It was in the late sixties, and she died three or four years later. The two youngest Mann children were Bibi and Mädi—of *Early Sorrow* fame. Bibi married a Swiss girl, and Mädi, the Italian philosopher Giuseppe Borgese. I think she is still alive and writes books with a feminist angle.

INTERVIEWER

How do you rank Mann as a novelist?

BEDFORD

Buddenbrooks is a very fine novel by any standards, and *The Magic Mountain* is an intellectual mountain. And there is *Death in Venice* and the stories. I don't have a great affinity with later books. I think his brother Heinrich had a neglected talent; I was once very taken by his trilogy *Der Untertan,* which was about the horrors of pre-World War I German militarism and bureaucracy. Heinrich Mann was possibly prophetic in the Orwellian sense.

INTERVIEWER

What happened when the war broke out?

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BEDFORD

Many of the German émigrés were interned by the French at first. A horrible mistake. Later when the Germans were actually occupying France, most of them managed to escape via Spain and Portugal and eventually reached Hollywood, where Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer was doling out contracts. I too managed to reach America by way of Italy, a few days before Mussolini entered the war. I even saw Chamberlain's effigy being burnt in Genoa. We managed to get on an American boat to Boston. I later learned that the ship was carrying half the gold reserve of the Bank of Italy. It was held and searched in Gibraltar. If we had been torpedoed, the gold would have gone to the bottom of the ocean!

INTERVIEWER

How did you earn a living in America?

BEDFORD

Well, I scraped through with journalism, secretarial work, a bit of translating. But we were jolly hard up. We reached Philadelphia on the day of the Democratic National Convention, and Roosevelt was nominated.

INTERVIEWER

In the 1940s you began to be published. Had you written books before that time?

BEDFORD

Three full-length novels, all of which were eventually turned down by diverse publishers. They were not very good, over-intellectualized and much influenced by Aldous Huxley's ideas and style. I had not found a voice of my own. Then I wrote *A Visit to Don Otavio,* which was a very different kettle indeed. I wrote it several years after returning from Mexico in the mid-forties. It is a travel book written by a novelist. I wanted to get across the extraordinary beauty of Mexico, the allegro quality of its climate, with the underlying panic and violence inherited from a long and bloody history. The book was an

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immediate critical success, which made a great difference to me. It meant that I had reached the identity I wanted—that of a writer.

INTERVIEWER

Then came *A Legacy*. A novel that is now considered a classic. Was it well received at the time?

BEDFORD

Oh no! At first it was almost a flop. The *Times* critic said he couldn't make head or tail of it. My American publisher said it was one of the dullest books he'd ever read! And the *Atlantic Review* asked for more research—indeed I did no research for that book whatsoever. It all came from memory and instinct retrieved. Memory acquired in my first eight years. Eventually Evelyn Waugh reviewed *A Legacy* for the *Spectator,* and things began to turn around for the book. In the United States it even became a bestseller, the only one of my books that ever did. Evelyn Waugh supposed my name was a pseudonym. In some of his letters he wrote that his guess was that I was a middle-aged diplomat, ". . . say Cultural Secretary in Belgrade, who knows about European society and is rather short on Catholic dogma." Then publishers began to court me—for a short time they sent roses and smoked salmon. Collins offered a fairly substantial advance over three years to write another novel. I didn't. I wrote *The Best We Can Do,* which is a rational, unsensational report of a sensational murder case.

INTERVIEWER

Then you wrote another book on law: *The Faces of Justice.* When did you become interested in law?

BEDFORD

When I was twelve and lived in London with a family who let me do pretty well as I wished, I used to go to the law courts in the Strand instead of going to films or matinées. For awhile I toyed with the idea of becoming a barrister. I didn't have the

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education, and anyway women at the time were considered to have the wrong voice for it. However, going to law courts is a good education for a novelist. It provides you with the most extravagant material, and it teaches the near impossibility of reaching the truth.

INTERVIEWER

You reported on some very famous cases. Which do you remember best?

BEDFORD

The most hilarious one was the trial of *Lady Chatterley's Lover.*

INTERVIEWER

You also covered the Jack Ruby trial—what did you think of him?

BEDFORD

A poor little neurotic fellow who looked everyday more like a dying chicken. The trial itself was a travesty. I can never bring myself to believe in the conspiracy theory. Jack Ruby did what thousands of other Americans would have done had they owned a gun and been there at the time. Ruby happened to walk in at the worst moment. But it is hard for us to accept that we are all at the mercy of chance.

INTERVIEWER

Then you wrote *A Favourite of the Gods.* How was that received?

BEDFORD

Mixed. I had been praised by "the wrong people," such as Nancy Mitford and Evelyn Waugh, and some critics blamed me for not writing a different novel. The same happened more or less with my next book, *A Compass Error.*

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INTERVIEWER

You then took six years to research and write the biography of Aldous Huxley. You said it was "a labor of love," and he seems to have been a key figure in your life, a father figure and mentor.

BEDFORD

Aldous was not a father to anyone, certainly not to his own son, Matthew. He was an intellectual and moral idol. He was born with an immense intellectual capacity linked to unlimited curiosity in every field—science, nature and, indeed, mankind. His memory was encyclopedic. He intended to become a scientist, but his very defective eyesight made this impossible. He was, like Erasmus, a universal genius. He had little concern for himself. His concern was for the human condition. When he was very young he was appalled by the First World War, by the cynicism of generals and politicians. He always said that two-thirds of all our sorrows are man-made and not necessary as far as the universe is concerned. He constantly asked what we can do to make men and women better, happier, less aggressive, more loving. Most of his later work deals with this question. As a man, his first reaction was benevolent. His temper was even, though I think he often suffered from depression. He also had a certain emotional dryness and found it difficult to communicate with people, though this became easier in his later American years. His marriage to Maria was his emotional education; she made him "human," as he himself would say. Aldous and Maria were people of the most extraordinary quality. I never met anyone who did not like him—artists, intellectuals, scientists, cooks, car washers. . . . They were all devoted to him.

INTERVIEWER

Yet he is not widely read now.

BEDFORD

People do read him again. And most of his books are in print. The environmentalist party, the Greens, ought to take him up—perhaps they have.

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INTERVIEWER

Did he talk to you about his interest in mysticism?

BEDFORD

No. He wrote about it, notably in *The Perennial Philosophy* and *The Doors of Perception.* When he spoke, he sometimes took off the way a cadenza does in a concerto, but you didn't ask Aldous what he thought about the atom bomb.

INTERVIEWER

Island, his last book, was not well understood—the novel form did not help. I remember Juliette Huxley saying that it was his testament in a way, and that the cool reception was a disappointment to him.

BEDFORD

Yet it is the novel that the Greens are discovering, which will probably last. As you say, it was his testament.

INTERVIEWER

You are read in various languages. Which "foreign" books influenced you most in the early days?

BEDFORD

My earliest serious influences were French: Stendhal, Flaubert, the Symbolist poets: Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Baudelaire. . . . We all were of course bowled over by Proust, but was he an influence? As for English writers, Evelyn Waugh above all. Cyril Connolly's *The Unquiet Grave* still moves me—I used to travel with it. I mind very much about the quality of writing—its edge, its elegance—Cyril had that. We also shared a feeling for food, good wine, landscape, animals, classical literature. . . . He is still very important to me. I used to admire Ivy Compton-Burnett for her originality and ruthlessness.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever think of becoming a French writer?

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BEDFORD

I did. When I was very young and living in the south of France. Evelyn Waugh wrote, "Mrs. Bedford has a firm belief that French is spoken at home." That beautiful language has very strict rules, and I like taking certain liberties and shortcuts, which one can get away with in English.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think that you have succeeded in creating your own personal style in the language you finally chose?

BEDFORD

That is going a bit too far! Every writer worth his or her salt eventually develops a voice. I aim at brevity, fluency and lucidity. I also try for a certain lyrical element. I would like to be able to put across what I have seen and lived, with a certain grace. Whether I succeed . . .

INTERVIEWER

What about today's writers? You are in the tradition of European realism, but what about modernism, postmodernism and magical realism?

BEDFORD

I don't hold with that sort of jargon. If the gods have given you a talent, you try to use it in a way that suits it. Compartmentalizing is an enemy of literature and art and of good sense as well. I write because I'm a writer. It is rather like cooking: to make something out of the raw material at hand. Today's writers? I love Bruce Chatwin and Patrick Leigh-Fermor, those two travel writers. I also immensely admire Elizabeth Jane Howard, who is a first-rate novelist. The first two volumes of her quadrilogy, *The Light Years* and *Marking Time* have just been published in the United States. Other novelists I admire are Nicholas Mosley and Tom Stacy—the latter's recent novel, *Decline,* is profoundly disturbing and superbly written. His words sing.

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INTERVIEWER

English is a wonderful tool, strong, rich and malleable. Foreign writers have adopted it—one thinks of Conrad, Nabokov, Isak Dinesen, yourself. . . . Beckett, of course, preferred French. I think foreign writers have enriched English literature and language by bringing something of their own cultures to it, by the ways they have used the language. Today there are all the Indians and Africans and Afro-Caribbeans as well. . . .

BEDFORD

Some are very good, but others seem to me to be messing up the English language to too great an extent. Isak Dinesen was a very fine writer. She *used* English, but I don't think she took it a step further. I think the difference is that one can take liberties with one's own language—I do all the time, rightly or wrongly. German I find uncongenial—the grammar is so restricting. I'm barely able to speak it now, so perhaps I'm not a proper judge.

INTERVIEWER

Don't you have any feeling for Germany as your country of origin?

BEDFORD

No. That is due to what happened in the Nazi years. I think I've gotten over it, as far as one ever can. I even returned to Germany a few times—always as a reporter, first in 1964 to cover the Auschwitz trial in Frankfurt. I respect the new Germany and some of its democratic institutions, but I have no links or German connections.

INTERVIEWER

Do you lack a sense of belonging?

BEDFORD

In so far as I have a sense of belonging, it is to Europe. I lived in the United States for a few years and enjoyed some of it—more than half of my greatest friends have been Ameri-

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cans. I'm deeply, intrinsically attached to France and to the French way of living. My ties with England are language, profession, institutions and, once more, friends.

INTERVIEWER

Did you read American authors when you lived in the United States?

BEDFORD

Yes, naturally. I had before—Hemingway, Katherine Porter, Edmund Wilson, Dorothy Parker, Louis Auchincloss . . . The American writers I always read are Henry James and Edith Wharton. After the war I got to know some American writers in Paris: Jane Bowles, Truman Capote, Carson McCullers, Eudora Welty. . . .

INTERVIEWER

I would like to ask you about a rather delicate aspect of your life, because it relates to your work. In *Jigsaw* you describe how as a young girl you allowed yourself to be seduced by a young Frenchman and then fell head over heels in love with a woman. You have been discreet about your sexual life but, at the same time, candid regarding your predilections. In so far as a writer's sexuality informs his or her work and outlook, would you like to say something about that?

BEDFORD

I have always been candid about my private life and shall continue to be so. Whatever happened in *Jigsaw* happened to the narrator who is a character in the novel. If readers want to draw conclusions, it is up to them. I might point out that almost all the human relationships treated in my fiction are marriages. Apart from young Flavia and the narrator in *Jigsaw*, who are both very young and whose future inclinations remain uncertain, I've never introduced a single homosexual character in my books.

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INTERVIEWER

The late Marguerite Yourcenar maintained that female homosexuality differed radically from the male variety. Do you agree?

BEDFORD

Madame Yourcenar was right on the whole. Women homosexuals seek emotions, whereas for men the chief attraction is sexual promiscuity. I think most people are a bit ambidexterous—it's all a question of degree.

INTERVIEWER

Attitudes change. For example, Colette and other women homosexuals of her time seemed to celebrate their sexuality. They did not create a ghetto, nor did they proselytize, or have what you call an "elite complex." It all seems a bit too earnest now.

BEDFORD

Colette was a law unto herself. She simply had affairs with whomever she chose. Some of these affairs were rather public. In those days—I'm talking of France, though others might think of Berlin—it was quite grand and fashionable to be queer. At least artists and writers were more naturally open. . . . At the same time we were discreet. One didn't necessarily shock one's friends or the passersby. I find today's sexual militancy appalling. Private life is private life, which means *private*.

INTERVIEWER

What about feminism? Have you been involved in the women's movement of the past two decades?

BEDFORD

I have not! I believe that men and women have different natures and different needs. Naturally some women have more masculine talents and aspirations, just as some men lack the protective or aggressive instinct. I'm not talking about legal and political rights, which women have more or less got by

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now—at least in the West. What I object to is the aggression and self-pity of some militant feminists.

INTERVIEWER

What are your plans for the future? Are you working on a novel?

BEDFORD

I am. Trying to. I never talk about my work in progress. All I can tell you is that the action once more takes place in the past.

INTERVIEWER

Do you write everyday?

BEDFORD

One should. It is not always easy. I seem to be doing so many other things beside working, such as serving on committees and book juries.

INTERVIEWER

It appears that you are hugely interested in wine and know a great deal about it.

BEDFORD

I love wine. I can call it a lifetime passion, and I know a certain amount about it—one can never end learning about wine. Wine is produced by cooperation between nature, climate and man. No two men, even with neighboring vineyards, ever produce the same wine. And now we have the modern techniques, many of them coming from California. One could say that we live in a golden age of wine.

INTERVIEWER

I suppose some of the power and the charms of wine are expressed in the following passage from *A Compass Error:* "[She] had loved wine from childhood on. She loved the shapes of bottles, and of course the romantic names and the pictures

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of the pretty manor houses on the labels, and she loved the link with rivers and hillsides and climates and hot years, and the range of learning and experiment afforded by wine's infinite variety; but what she loved more than these was the taste—of peach and earth and honeysuckle and raspberries and spice and cedarwood and pebbles and truffles and tobacco leaf; and the happiness, the quiet ecstasy that spread through heart and limbs and mind".

You are obviously a gourmet as well, because your description of food in *Jigsaw* is marvelously evocative—one could almost taste it.

BEDFORD

I hate the word *gourmet*. I love food, good food, simple, authentic. Taking food with friends has a sacramental dimension for me. It is part of the love of life.

—**Shusha Guppy**

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Jeffery Donaldson

Visions of Marthe Bonnard

My miracle cures left her of two minds.
Pillowed in the bed, she would seem to be
all acquiescence, even eagerness,

listened for doctors' voices in the hall,
and seemed prepared to turn back the bedclothes
when they cared to look, or lay on their hands,

and coughed when they asked. But as she declined,
she pushed her food away and turned her eyes
from conversation and arriving cards.

She watched out the window. We moved the chairs,
rolled her vanity aside, and roped
back the fallen drapes to clear the view,

(all views she kept up in the air), in light
put out in what seemed vases of cut crystal
as she looked about, one on the sill, and one

beside the bed; it wavered and then vanished
as the shadows came and went under the thin
whim of cirrus clouds above the garden.

That night she lay unturned in the crumpled sheets,
and listened, and let her heart, like a small fish,
vanish from hearing with a gentle flutter;

then nothing but surface ripples in the bed
that looped and bellied like disturbed water,
till the carriers smoothed them flat. It was

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her manner of detachment: the coffin
was braced between two chairs along the wall,
and was too large by half for her small frame.

She lay to one side: . . . *but why even want*
to be everywhere at once, she used to say.
Not that she tried. I think of all the things

she would get herself into day by day,
the bath and the bed, and the garden
where she pruned and seeded, carried water

and dumped water, and how she moved, always
silent, sure as the overspill of a spring
river: when pressed, it canters into lost

pools and runnels under rock, fills and then
empties back. It was a way she kept
herself clear for whatever might happen next.

II

The tub is useless now, won't keep the water
it was made to keep, but where the tailored
leg turns at the bottom, a small piece

has come away, and not checked, lets whole baths
through into unbrooked pooling rills over
the tiles, half an hour's work to sponge it dry.

A neighbour with no garden at all wants
to take it for a planter! bear it from here
and filling it with soil to the brim

in time find colours of a private taste
break clear of their own roots, bloom, and motion
towards the light he stands them in.

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Now they've still to show, the blessed movers,
careless of my repeated calls to come
first thing at dawn. There was a time we'd find

this bath, like good china, topped with the cold
daylight's pellucid drink, clear and acrid,
a cold tea distilled for those seraphic

shades moving in a change of clouds across
the walls and tiles. But when the cup is cracked,
it should be drained and washed and laid aside.

God knows I need the neighbour's help, plumbing
tied off like ribbon, a book set on the sill
beside the chalk-white lilies in changed water,

and the whole tub dragged from its own impression
on the tiles, and levered towards the door,
exposing now the unsunned wall behind.

The primer is dog-eared like dried paper,
and thinned to the black iron beneath it,
where the water once would curl in tiny

whirlpools at the drain and then fall away.
It's worn by the faucet at the upper ridge,
and on the edge of the protruding lip

the porcelain look that she would rub off
a little more each morning, afternoon
and night that she stepped in, held herself still

above the shallow rain water she'd gathered,
paused, and letting herself down, withdrew
into her strange ablutionary rite.

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She kept a chair beside, a purple robe
in easy reach, a glass and an open book;
she would seem to brace herself, recumbent,

quiet as the water she managed not to stir
(except at times to shift a hand or foot),
and cast her eyes each moment, with a look

of expectation it appeared, to where
the window rose behind, and then upward
to the sidelit solaria of cloud,

whose mountainous interiors formed and cleared
above her gaze. For hours she would lie
and work what seemed then a pointless vigil

and not ablution, times I chanced to look
in on her, dreamily airing a leg
above the tepid, agitated pool.

She'd watch me watch the water purl across
the shallows of her neck. *Now which of us*
is doing less, she'd ask. *You'll learn the hard*

secret of a good artist's model: keep
doing nothing for long and you'll end up
beside yourself, and what would you do then?

III

Keep doing nothing for long and you'll see.
There are rare mornings—tease a curt flame
from the ash duff, put the water on, or

find a rose suitable for the breakfast
table—when the particular itself
becomes both definite and submissive,

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restless and resigned. It was like nothing
out of the ordinary; but she saw
to it that the room changed, as she rested

under the sheet of water, and nothing
came to pass there but a cloud, in the short time
that I paused beside the door. You had to look

for it, not as she did, but in her eyes:
nothing so deep as that she turned them down,
the way a lover might, who finds herself

subject to a warm advance, waited for
but unexpected, a sudden bright glance
off the wall, kaleidoscoped in widening

circles above the shimmering water,
a hanging fire it was her presence
of mind not to see through, as she reflected,

saw the gold confetti on the tile
and stonework for what it was, all the while
she lay there, and knew from the garden rows

allurements of the marigold, as they
came on at the lifted sash, a touch
at the neck, a fresh whisper at the ear:

for so she languished, put on all the airs
of politesse, and closed her eyes, and took
her fill of the glow and the waterlights,

and no sooner seemed above all other things
inclined to lie motionless, she coloured,
and turned around, and pulled the plug.

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. . . It's empty now, and the movers I called
can have it, if they'd come. Make a man wait
long enough, you'll find his patience wanting:

I've brought it all back myself—though at a loss
to muse my fill at what once brimmed the antique
crucible—and carry it off as best

I can. Is it knowing—and did she know?—
when to say enough? Strange how you never
get to feel—no matter your age—that you've

outstayed the welcome of that graceful host
that tends upon your health, keeps it above
the salt: a table spread, a tub for washing

and a warm bed, and then if one or two
needs more might be indulged, the surprising
candor and dalliance of a real angel

at your elbow, whose fondling antics
are your own. She felt the time was more time
than she had coming to her. But I think

of the child she was, up past her bedtime,
late, with one light on in the top room,
left alone for who knows how much longer

by elders entertaining below, host
to other guests whose overheard laughter
softly fills the house. The child is quiet,

watchful, anxious to be unremembered,
but still close as dreaming to the festive
din of leaving and arriving revelers

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from within, whose whimsy and merriment,
sustained for no amusement but their own,
she has by heart, and which, even as she dreams

that she's gone to listen at the top stair,
lulls her to sleep. If nothing more, it was
that mirth she listened for, each day she broke

the finish along the water's surface,
and there immersed, let the tubwater's lap
make free with her, loop and mumble at the brim.

She had a feeling for it, but never
looked back at what she left behind, once the bath
was empty. I could think that she stepped clear,

was cleansed and satisfied, but for a drag
on the mind that has stayed with me, solid
and intractable as this broken tub.

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Two Poems by Charlie Smith

To Lautréamont

I don't know what to say to you
and have called you names—mutilator of souls,
warden of dust, evocateur—that only placed me
at a disadvantage. I turn my sweet gaze
away and lose you, I fall in love with small
women selling curios, and come to in white rooms
high above the city to the sound of faint
music and a child crying. Why are the walls
rubbled and muddled like the walls of caves?

I forgot you at times, chased wounded birds
into the thickets, small, yellow-eyed hawks
and less important creatures, and it was
not only from despair that I stayed away
from your palaces: I came to love the woods
and the small declivities in which cool
water stood calmly as if sleeping.

I am afraid all the time but go on anyway;
I speak loosely, as one who was familiar
with grandeur, but it is in the simple
sadness of twilight that I am most useful;
it is there, as you have taught me,
that I can be appreciated as one for whom
the soft struggles of reason give way
to a shoddy but pleasing invention.
I hope that the carved sticks of my will,
broken so often and useless now, might appeal
to you, and these worn tales of romance,
these weasels and mice I have tracked
to their dens and befriended, won't offend.

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You are on my mind always these days,
always in the high cavities of the wind
I hear of you now; some say you are near,
they say it is as if no time has passed,
they say you were on your way all along.

The Chinese New Year

I

Cool spring, and a fine freshness,
burred and fruity airs along Canal,
and a dimpled face, scowling then
smiling, looks out between gold Buddhist
portals where for a dollar you get a
scroll that tells what's coming this
year—and into this year I go empty-handed
forward as a man goes into sunny fields
of wheat, fortuneless but happy, like
a man coming to on a beach in Africa,
who gets up into the squalor and stink
and begins to make a little home for
himself among the shrubs and palm
flowers; like a man who stands up in
a field of flowers and looks around,
remembering how it was to fall in love
and go gamely on with everything,
and how her breath smelled of almonds,
and how the moon shone on her breasts,
and how he thought he was getting
somewhere at last and stood outside
shops in the Chinatown stunned as she tried
on jewelled slippers, pair after pair—

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II

and the year that rises, like a vanished
continent the sea ebbs back from, sprawls
naked before me in patches of rose
and gold, and I hear the voices that
live in the shapes and gestures of the
dense world around me, the silent voice
of a boy climbing the dark stairs at the
back of a house, and the voice of the bird-
wing fan the girl going alone into her
future brings to her lips and kisses, as
she will kiss, years from now, the face
of the man who loves her; and I hear
the soft singing, like radio waves
stained by plum flowers, going on
behind the bins and catchments brimming
with trash; and out on the river where
the stars float all night on their backs
looking up at themselves, the foghorn
solemnly cries, like an owl, or like one
so struck by life he must steadily repeat
the moment of grace, that is neither warning
nor welcome, but the passing and figure
of time itself, the chipped figure
standing in the shallows of night, singing.

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Three Poems by Stephen Yenser

Carnal Knowledge

Now LeRoy on the kill room floor
Was almost larger than life.
Mondays the green fatigues he wore
Had creases sharp as the knife

That was his very bread and butter,
And his face was hand-carved ebony.
For days the new boy with the stutter
Stayed out of LeRoy's way.

Later that summer he learned to tell
(After LeRoy had his fun)
A skinned pizzle from a skinned tail
And not to grind the one

Into the dogfood mix he'd pour
In boxes, freeze in lots.
He'd scoop up cheeks, as sweet and sour
As rotting apricots,

And fill each barrel till it weighed
Two hundred pounds and more.
The elevator rope had frayed
So many years before

He couldn't look up as he let
His load down twenty feet.
LeRoy laughed to see him sweat
And went on boning meat.

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Across the street, at the Blue Moon,
He flashed a friend's draft card
And drank one tall red beer each noon.
The barmaid made it hard

(He would have said he had "a heart on"),
But he'd punch in on time,
Hose the concrete down, then start on
The tripe, slick with chyme.

He marveled at the huge pink lungs
("They's soft as a big gal's knockers")
That he hung up with hearts and tongues
On hooks in chilling lockers.

He learned it paid to be precise.
Learned an esophagus
Was really easier to slice
Than greasy radiator hose.

LeRoy owned he'd eaten dogfood.
The kid swore he would last
Till school began. The pay was good.
"The rules are hard and fast,"

LeRoy'd sigh. "But they's the *only*
Ones," he'd wink and grin.
"Whatcha do when *you* get lonely?"
Before the days drew in,

He met a girl, wheatshocking blonde.
On weekend nights they drove
Out Sweetbriar Lane and by the pond
Made love, like mad, made love.

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Art History

Either happiness or art. On doit trouver
le bonheur dans son art. *[The great*
artists'] lives have become atrophied,
like an organ they no longer use.

—Rilke to Clara Westhoff
5 September, 1902

In front of Notre Dame, shy and sly,
With an awkward, a kind of duckward walk,
That young *clochard* edged up to women tourists
So occupied with their blue guides and green
They hardly noticed he was holding something
Next to him, down low, so gingerly,
In both his hands, we thought it could be injured.
Given a sudden glimpse, they'd flutter off
And then resettle, ignoring him. That evening,
Years back, your great, your undone work before you
Still, in that Champs café, flushed from Pernod,
Breasts pushed up by your thick, tanned, sculptor's wrist
Resting on the blue-veined marble table,
You talked about the nave, the rebuilt spire,
The Virgin with her foot upon the serpent
(Restored), and not the animated gargoyle
Who'd picked you out, much as a boy would choose
A favorite girl to frighten with his toad.
And yet: what were you thinking, as we drifted back—
What did you see most clearly, in your mind's eye,
That dark within suffused as by a light
Subtler and warmer than the great rose window's?
But how to keep these things apart, you muse
From somewhere far. *The flèche, for instance,* its hard
Imperative, *and his bared soul itself,*
Unwrinkling, growing guileless once again.

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Voices

Σῶμα, θυμήσου ὄχι μόνο τὸ πόσο ἀγαπήθηκες . . .

In Kolonaki's glassy labyrinth,
At any corner I run into her
And don't. At Zonar's now: an electrolier
Above my table, the gleams of wealthy chatter,
Pier glasses, glossy paneling on each plinth,
Ceiling fans idling. Vitrines of baklava,
Loukoum. "And what if I don't sleep with you?"
We leaned across a table by a mirror,
Maybe this one. As frequently that year,
I had been reading all night in Cavafy
And couldn't see his point, he was so clear.
I read him for the idioms; I read
Him for his rhymes. She bent to kiss her coffee.
Clatter of glass to glass and fork on platter.
The floor in diamonds of marble inlay.
"I'll have to love you, then, forever," she said.
That night it was the perfect thing to say.

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Cynthia Zarin

The Venetian Optician

A thin gold catch like a bee's stinger—
    but there are no bees in winter—
lost from a necklace of honey-colored beads,
each one globular, size of a swollen knuckle,
bargained for behind San Marco, the box unbuckled
then rebuckled by the proprietor,
    a man discreetly eyeshadowed, while the radiator

exhaled tails of steam. Cyclops, the mind needs
    a catalogue for so much minutae, seeds
like black pepper, beaks of marble birds entwined
breathing from a thimble—carved beneath—
of air. The eye drinks it in, its glassine sheath
a studio, permeable to the curate's show-
    and-tell, his blow-by-blow

explanation of a marble claw's sly clench: the refined
    grasp of the Pope's carver who defined
detail only in the difficult
and let grossness be free of improvement:
while whittling might give air and movement
to a bear's mute paw the bear himself is frozen.
    Still, *we* were moving, that day having chosen

to light on three churches, leagues apart, the result
    being bad temper, waterlog in an occult
cynosure of canals, a brackish lariat
thrown out across the foam of Venus's wake,
haunted, grubby, the walkways stone, the sky a lake,
an old eye opening and shutting, its lashes
    eastern, mystic, gilded rehashes

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of history, emerald astonishments, or, instead, minuets
of sunbeams, minnows, dew, paillettes . . .
Sequins. A pleasant dolphin speaking to amaze
his daughters, one mogul uncle from the eddies of his brocade armchair
would proclaim: "My girls sewed them on by hand." Stare,
if you can, at those tiny stitches. The mere
suggestion makes an iris swim with tears.

As for me, what I could see I saw up close. I moved in haze
and called it home. For years, my gaze
at ——what? *What I dreamed*—went undetected:
Instead of squinting, I opened my eyes wide.
Myopic when a child, I made my own amniotic Venice from a tide
of lace and lagoon shadows, capital of a legacy of sight
so bad one wonders by rights

how we survived, blindly, so ill-connected.
Nonetheless, Byzantium and Mother Russia met, directed
by who knows what lights, through Fez, Jerusalem, and Trent.
Jostle. And there lost, accidentally broken, scratched:
to me, spectacles matched
their iron cousins. They were manacles,
meant to keep me to straight lines, then barnacles

on the translucent face whose contours bent
along the bathroom mirror's bevel. Blur lent
gold dust to what strangeness drew. Was I afraid
to see my face? Or did I wish the made world
as unapproachable as God? A dervish whirled
mysteriously, a fog, parented
by nothing that warranted

the catchall explanation, arbitrary, but bade,
rather, to begin with myself as center Shade:
I would grow into a likeness of myself before my eyes. Black
letters on the schoolroom map that I knew best

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said left was East and right was West,
and all the ocean was a weedy loom that drew
in water woof and warp of gray and blue,

and Venice was the weaver daughter. Sack
of salt, aquarium of dreams, behind San Zaccaria
at La Scuola I lost a contact lens and saw the sequined dragon
fall, my swimming eye bereft of its own
ceiling dome, clear as tears, on which shone
an ever-changing retinue: icons—among them, you—
ristorantes, saint's lives, gobs of Mary blue.

The dragon
curled his tail and for a half day won.
And both of us, who feel at home only near water
nearly lost our tempers when the fourth Venetian,
a smiling sage, pointed not toward an optician
but *la bella vista.* And indeed but for me,
Ocean's nursling did amply please. But instead, a Sea

of Tears, a hornet dressed in wet mohair, bartering
tantrums for sweets. On second thought, a cur
better off not wed. But chance had saddled you
with such a wife, whose saint might be Lucia, patron
of the blind, lot of temptation, soon Matron
of Time. Then luck: the fifth-asked passerby
drew, as Tintoretto might, a map that took one try

to follow. *Uno momento.* In the ship, tight as a shoe,
an entire family was trying on glasses. From Mama, a *moue*
at Elisabetta framed in green, and Papa's hornrims
equally despised by Tonio, buying Ray Bans to wear
inside. A few fearful moments to unearth my pair
—an hour later I was released into the drizzly peace
of Venice in winter, and still carry with me the piece

of paper that the optician pressed with his slim
hand into mine: a guarantee that with his lenses, dim

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sight would forever disappear, and I would see
more clearly than Santa Chiara. It was the right
lens that was torn, and he replaced. Slightly,
still, it lists east, which means
by some peculiar beam, the past that in its seam

led you to me. That same day, I tore
the catch of those gold beads, though I set a store
by their sunny look and provenance, the jeweler who loved
my mohair coat, the intermittent roar of trains
of steam that stained his brocade curtains
cheroot brown. What could the optician's promise
mean? Gloss must mist

upon a stone, or have no purpose nor be proved.
As a child I learned that works moved
the world in earthbound circles that its mettle
chose: to be just, not to tell lies, to love the muse
of story-telling and not confuse
the love of knowledge with what one knows.
Only here and there did Beauty's dream show

up in the prickly scene. And constancy's nettle
pricks me still, sews down visions and settles
for them on a sequined tail that moves: a tail,
or many tales. This January is the fifth gold helix
spun since that glass strand was lost, and those black
circumflexes
that I see now are your eyelashes, a tiny scheme
around your spangled iris of Venetian green,

dear both in detail and in line, and there no pale
reflection of the inner life, but rather the tale
in an illuminated chapter of a life
where sea and angels work to restore a loved one's sight
and the Venetian doctor is proved right—
for seeing through your eyes more true than mine
was to forfeit visions but get twice in kind.

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Dominion

Thomas Wilson

A rising sound can pass the point where a sleeper may incorporate it into his dream yet still fall short of being recognized. At this instant the sleeper imagines he can still go either way: his effort might be toward waking and recognition or toward a new dream into which the rising sound will disappear.

I

The Voortrekker Spa outside Johannesburg has its own station. Rueger saw it and the Spa grounds from a bend in the track as his train was pulling in. A glimpse that spoke to this troubled man of the future, of serenity, of utter freedom from what surrounds you. For the Spa does no blending in. It is not constructed out of the stone or wood of the region. It appears to be made entirely out of glass, ivory and the vitality drained from the dry, brown hills beyond it. When the sun goes behind a cloud and light on the reflecting pools is cut off, the radiance of the archways, roofs and walls seems to linger. Rueger felt different already, expectant, as if this radiance itself offered

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relief from his condition, as if this Spa light with a life of its own was somehow the cure for a lifelong sense of foreboding, that vague troubledness haunting him and seemingly everyone else he grew up with—a condition lingering with them all since childhood that no parent, no doctor, could trace to its source. Eventually, the lucky ones found their way to the Spa.

Rueger was shown to his room. On the writing desk was a room-service menu and a schedule of classes. It was disconcerting to find so many advanced programs introduced right at the start. He had never been much of a student.

For The Little Ones

1. Walking Mantras.
2. Patience and Play (tantrum conversion in relationships and sports).
3. Growing up among Aliens.
4. Fidgeting, Interrupting and the Nap Response.
5. The Chosen Children (reading Scripture).

Novice Adult

1. Primacy ("Whatever is, is right").
2. Retarding the earth's pull (Nautilus training).
3. Diet.
4. Reading Scripture (Tribes of Israel, Tower of Babel).
5. Berkeley, Hume and Nietzsche ("You must be nothing other than what you are. Yet what you are is everything that is.").
6. Alien Life. Immunization. Centering.
7. The Brain: two hemispheres, two poles and a core ("To thine own self be true.").
8. Imaging: mental harmony over error and discord.
9. Abstinence from ageing. Abstinence from fear. Hormonal Obedience.
10. Right and Wrong, Ours and Theirs vs. ISNESS.

A sliding glass wall and a plot of emerald grass separated Rueger from the noise of some bathers at a distant swimming pool. Its far rim was recessed into a towering polished curve

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cut into a hill of dark granite. The water was so luminous that waist-high bathers moved in front of the black stone like figures wading through light, the dark of night seemingly behind them. Rueger sat down beside the glass and tried to puzzle out the Advanced listings. It wasn't long before he put them aside. They would have to be explained.

They were miles from the sea, but the Spa grounds beyond the pool (the trim, leafy terraces, the ponds, the cricket field) had that burnished look associated with the fierce, purifying winds at the shore. It was now late afternoon, and there were shadows, but Rueger's eyes didn't narrow when he came to them. He eased back into his chair and looked at the view without trying to read it. This was brand new. Where was that hazy sense of something out there waiting, that steady presence unseen and ungathered together? Always, there had been a steady drifting off from the work or play at hand toward the empty spaces beyond. The eyes not wandering, checking. But now, here, he leisurely considered the moon, faint as a watermark on a sheet of blue paper; it would be dark soon. Night. Rueger welcomed it as the explorer marks his first evening in a new world.

Wrapped in towels, a group hurried toward him from the pool. There were some vaguely familiar faces—all suntanned and smiling. He decided they had to be sons and daughters of people he worked with on the floor of the Diamond Exchange. Suddenly he realized they were in fact his colleagues. Clear faces free of the condition. His peers with light limbs and light tread. His *peers*. Unencumbered.

He wandered through the halls until the dinner hour. The spiraling corridors of glass and the great gliding reflections on the floors and ceilings reminded him of the Cape Town Aquarium, but here it was solely the action of people and clouds. Remote and wise, in cotton of the purest white, Spa personnel floated by in the dusk.

They were all coming from the dining hall that first night when the lights suddenly dimmed down low. Talking stopped, and the strollers in the corridor parted quietly to form an open lane down the center. No one appeared to mind the

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disruption. Even the youngest child waited with a calm that approached drowsiness.

Five men and five women, close together, moving fast without rushing, came down the open lane like a private train on a cleared track. The ten original Elders, founders of the Spa. They were dressed a little like Roman senators. The light was dim, but Rueger, for an instant, saw their faces clearly. Despite the trailing spiritual quality of their passage, what he felt was envy. Envy of whatever made them so unto themselves, so . . . exempt. They were to their surroundings what the Spa architecture was to its. Then and there Rueger decided not to go back to his old life without that immunity for himself.

He was willing to work for it. He took every class open to him; never staying in the back in order to coast through Centering, Bible study, Primacy, or Imaging, and he kept to his room until his homework was done. There was much he didn't understand, but his steady, simple faith in the Elders was enough to ease his mind. It bothered him a little that he couldn't debate this point or that with the others, but he was singled out by the Elders for his willingness, his gratitude, and the praise carried him through. Weeks went flying by. Rueger called his office at the Diamond Exchange and demanded an extension of his leave.

Three weeks before graduation Rueger left a group at poolside and, without a word, struck out toward the hills. He had never been alone in a rural area before, so it was perfect for testing his new skills. Without fully knowing why, he felt confident—armed, in fact—like some sort of futuristic samurai.

The land between Johannesburg and the Spa is a treeless rolling dust bowl suffering from the sun and wind. A few sheltering hillsides are used by the Ndebele tribesmen still allowed to sharecrop. Rueger was approaching one such farm. The farmhouse was a rectangle of packing crates roofed with corrugated sheet metal. There was a small courtyard in front with a low mud wall once vivid with geometric, Ndebele designs. In the afternoon sunlight, against the dirt-brown hills

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swept clean by the wind, the farmhouse had color and distinctness that would be lost in another setting.

Except for the elder daughter in the house, the family was well away in the landowner's potato field. She worked in the house because she was not mobile enough for the outside. The weight and smallness of her iindzilas (the gleaming stacks of brass rings fitted permanently around the ankles, wrists and neck) had caused the deformation of her collarbones and bad swelling in her forearms and upper calves. Late growth and weight gain had caused her first discomfort then pain and near immobility. Over the swollen areas her skin was stretched thin to a lighter brown too tender to rub, but sometimes she could hold her palms against the sides and steady them. Otherwise she was comfortable in a big housedress of deep blue and green, high-top tennis shoes and a short coral red blanket over one shoulder. Busy with her cleaning, she glanced up and vaguely saw Rueger on the path. She looked down, sure that he would pass on by like all the others. When she glanced up again he was at the window staring in.

Rueger had advanced through the hills bringing them low one at a time. For weeks he had known little but Spa white, so the hills, sky and sun took on the dazing boldness of old Technicolor. Somehow everything looked quite up close and distinct without losing its distance: pictures that rushed forward to him while seeming unable to move.

At the edge of the first valley he had remembered to stop and establish inner sovereignty, and there was heat and light to account for too. What a relief to know now you didn't actually have to understand—just remember the formula and enjoy the results. He knelt, forming at the base of his spine the Delta of Psychic Estuaries. There was the inevitable moment of distress when his nervous system purged itself, then he was calm through and through. Pure, impervious calm. How different and new everything was after. How casually he noted things in passing: sun above, hills below, the shadows between the hills on their quiet way across the valley and something of color set on a hillside ahead, as large and curious to him as a

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piece of municipal sculpture. A great bird went soundlessly by overhead, dipping as it approached the object on the hill, then continuing on like a seamless insert from an animated film. How hot this valley must be, Rueger thought.

Ignoring the path to the farmhouse door, Rueger crossed the courtyard and vegetable garden to a window as if inspecting a life-size exhibit on display. There was a female alien inside.

Rueger stood at the window and looked at her and realized the Elders had been right about the source of his condition. But all those years, how could he not have known? According to the Elders, that was simple. Suppose, just suppose, you lived on a tiny island where you were never out of sight of the sea. And suppose you were born hydrophobic—wasn't it just possible to never realize that it is the *water* that's bothering you? Under those conditions wouldn't it seem as if you were just chronically out of sorts, on edge all the time, with no particular cause? And if you never left the island you would never know the feeling of being land-safe. Rueger had to admit that in his country you were never free of aliens, really: they had been out there, not far, a constant presence, all his life.

The Elders had made another thing clear. That, in a way, he had known all along: in the way that you can carry something around a long time without opening it up. You left it unopened if you suspected you wouldn't want to live with what was inside: like the island man who couldn't afford water to be the problem. The Elders pointed out that in Rueger's homeland, if you knew that aliens made you sick, you felt worse than you did when you weren't sure.

Unless you had dominion.

The lighting could have been better. Rueger put his head farther inside the farmhouse window to help adjustment to the dark; he was feeling very calm and a little curious. Outside behind him on the dry wind the great, rasping insects of the veldt were faintly coming and going, but in the room it was still and silent and cool. There were some smells, not unpleasant, but Rueger couldn't place them . . . he seemed to become aware of them in a moment other than the moment he smelled

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them. Not that things were slowing down exactly, rather it seemed that there had been a split into two times, one running nearby the other, and that in turn had split actions in two: one part happening in one time and finishing in the other. But the times were not running far apart at all and the effect was not unpleasant. After all, Rueger decided, this new self of his was still fragile, it had never been outside before.

There wasn't much to see, except her. Rueger appreciated that she stood very still, cooperating. Her stacks of rings interested him the most. He could see how they were used like collars at the ankles and wrists to retain some traditional alien shape with all its ins and outs, bulges and elongations like the neck. Well, they wanted to hold on to their original shape, he could understand that, the shape as it once was way, way back: that tribal anatomy they brought with them when they came.

Everything seemed to be going just fine. Rueger felt wonderful—or rather, he felt nothing, and *that* was wonderful. But standing at a window was no test. He would have to go inside.

She had not moved from beside the table or let the cloth go from her hand. Inside, Rueger was reminded of an empty toolshed he had played in as a child. On a whim he put his hands out before him to look at them. It was happening again.

Sometimes he felt a little detached—in the Spa dining hall, say. He would sit and look down at the busy hands in front of him as if they were someone else's, as if that someone was reaching around him to feed him or even reaching through him to get at his food. Sometimes it went on until Rueger felt almost like a sleeve (but then he knew he was going through a necessary change). And just now he felt that other self active again; he felt it reach through him easily and over to her. At this the alien's eyes went shut.

Rueger's hand on her shoulder touched the blue fabric, and while the hand was there his thumb slid over to the brass rings and followed them down under her dress top, finding the edge of her collarbone. He ran the pad of his thumb gently back and forth along the ridge as if to measure the length. But part of the bone dipped underneath the rings out of reach—well, he knew there would be nothing normal about it.

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He went on for a while . . . satisfying his curiosity here and there . . . testing his immunity this way and that in the manner of the island man newly able to face the shore, then able to draw close to the sea, now suddenly ready to march straight into the water. And while it lasted she stayed very still, standing so still on those legs until he was all through and gone from her house.

Back on the path, the heat was as stifling as the exhaust from an overheated machine, but it felt pleasant on Rueger's face. It was wonderfully clear now that he was close to a cure. He felt almost complete within himself. And wouldn't he have his new self to take with him wherever he might go?

Life after the Spa was fine—well, better. Almost unencumbered. His nerves were gone, so he felt he really had no complaint. But still, something was not quite right, something was missing that other graduates seemed to have taken with them from the Spa. But what? Rueger knew it was ungrateful to feel cheated, but there it was.

His work in the diamond industry had a reassuring flatness that bothered him only now and then. He was less prone now to hold a new stone up to the light or be drawn down to the Exchange between conferences (the bidding floor reminded him now of sitting too close to the screen at the movies). But, unexpectedly, the new Rueger was more a financial success than the old. Despite a listlessness seeping into work mediocre to begin with, promotions came to him ahead of schedule. It wasn't his record on the Exchange so much as his calm, his unfazed, reassuring calm. Through a routine of frantic price wars, boardroom theatricality and foreign economic sanctions, Rueger sauntered unperturbed. Those who had not been at the Spa referred to the phenomenon as "Rueger and his secret compass," and he was taken increasingly for a sage.

Not that he needed to unwind, but often Rueger would go for a drive after work. Long drives, with the silent town and the silent country moving past him as if on the current of some enormous river. There was talk of land mines out on the dirt

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roads, but Rueger's calm didn't permit him to dwell on it. Then an odd thing happened not more than a half dozen blocks from the financial district. He was on a side street leading to a lovely park-side boulevard. There ahead was the green expanse of the park and beyond that the colored lights of a shopping mall visible in the dusk. By the bus stop at the intersection ahead two small alien children were crouched by the side of the road. Nothing odd about them waiting for a bus there, Rueger thought, so many of the small ones were used as runners or towel boys in the health clubs downtown. Both would have proper identification. And how presentable they looked: clean, pressed shorts, suit coats, white, white shirts and the short brim caps (whenever Rueger saw a young alien dressed like this his first thought was that a terrible accident, a disfigurement, had happened to a European child). No, it was their posture, their crouching, that seemed out of place.

Rueger looked beyond, past the park to how the brightening lights of the mall came forward within the overarching field of the sunset. When he looked down again, an alien child was standing directly ahead with a brick in its hand. The other one was stepping off the sidewalk. Rueger tooted his horn. He slowed, forming in his mind how best to point out to such a child that it had picked too large a brick to throw properly. The sight of the first child was obliterated when the brick hit the windshield. The head of the second child appeared in the open window on the passenger side, and then a hint of something coming through the air. The second brick caught Rueger on the side of his face and ear, dazing and deafening him like a plunge under water.

Rueger crossed the park-side boulevard, the curb and soon was bowling across the grass toward the mall. Through his good ear he could hear the lush broadcast of pop tunes along the pedestrian walkway ahead. For some reason the car was locked into one speed, and he was quickly running out of park. All was blind ahead, but to either side he could see from the incoming edges of the mall front that the walkway wasn't far. Then it occurred to him to use the steering wheel, and the

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long bright carnival length of department stores swung broadly in along his right side and then fell away. Rueger put his head out of the window and found the breeze fresh and silent on his battered face. He continued on this way, reminded pleasantly of his boyhood driving experiences when his father would let him reach over to steer. Benches, trees, a vendor pushing home his cart sailed calmly by; a brick walk passed as an instant of color under his wheels; he rounded a pond. There was that plunge-under-water feeling, the grainy imprint of the brick end and a memory of the thick, blanking moment of the blow . . . otherwise he was fine, almost happy. The sheer novelty of it was so bracing, so welcome, that Rueger was alerted to what had been missing in his life.

On the highway home his ear began to throb, and he resorted to the advanced Spa programs for pain. After, as he drove he looked at the blood on his shirt, the glass and broken brick on the seat beside him—was it something to do with wounds that had been missing—the whole excitement of wounds and of wounding? Rueger sensed he was on the right track.

He began to vary his routine after work: going on foot in areas where he used to drive, mixing with crowds defiantly gathered together and lingering alone in places where he might encounter just about anyone. Slowly, carefully, he erected new pleasures on his stabile plane of flatness at the Exchange. And in this emerging double life Rueger felt himself taking fuller possession of his soul. He was far happier than before—that was clear—and the condition was gone. And yet he still felt a little confused, a little shortchanged. He knew there was more to be had.

II

One afternoon, black African workers were boarding the designated buses that commuted them home to KwaNdebele, Soweto and beyond. The setting sun burned in a forward window of one bus, and they filed in front of it on the way

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to their seats. How strange and slow these aliens are, Rueger observed to himself. Did they ever look tired in some normal way, could they in fact do anything without suggesting something "other"? He doubted it. Well, according to the Elders, they were outside God's grace, weren't they? Wasn't that why they were alien?

Not that Rueger felt entirely within grace himself—especially after listening to others testifying to theirs Sunday after Sunday. The church was always full. And he would be there in his pew, listening, convinced all over again such power was worth the wait. Yes, the Holy Spirit certainly seemed a good, basic thing to have in the scheme of things. And with it, perhaps, he would be complete. There could be no doubt about Rueger's method, for the word of God on this point was clear: "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings as eagles . . ." Wait, wait, wait upon the Lord—somedays Rueger recited scripture until he felt a little sheepish. It was embarrassing, after all, to surrender yourself when afterwards nothing gathered you in. He felt like the soldier who lays down his arms before someone not interested enough to collect them. But Rueger went on waiting until his devotion seemed established and his sacrifice clear.

Then one Friday at a small prayer meeting Rueger confided that he had felt open to the Spirit for a long time now, but there had been no sign forthcoming. He wasn't fed up with surrender exactly—it struck him as a waste, that was all. More than one man there smiled in a sympathetic and knowing way. These were familiar faces, dating for Rueger back to the Spa. And there was still something in all of them that he lacked—the power of the Holy Spirit? Was it as simple as that? Then John Niels, a captain in the Home Guard, invited Rueger to join him and the others as a guest on Soweto patrol.

"Don't you see," Niels said quietly. "You've been searching in the wrong place."

Well, Rueger did not see just then. But the next day, riding with the others in the Army transport, he could not help but notice that something was happening around him, an

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awakening, and the more soldiering they did the more noticeable it was in the men. Something was on its way.

Having seen to the boarding of alien workers outside Johannesburg, they were now all en route to Soweto by convoy. In the back of the transport Niels's men were dressed in brown khaki. Rueger admired the uniforms and weaponry, but his real envy of the soldiers had not yet begun. Behind the long low brown hills to the west of the highway was a great, red stillness. It touched the uppermost land and taller treetops across the road and eased up the slanting power lines. On a rise to the east an empty inspection station glowed as if some terrible light inside were pouring out through its walls. The separation between things up on the slopes and those by the road began to close, and to the west, beneath the sharp outline of the farthest ridge, the clear pattern of hillside shapes started to run together in the draining light. The canvas sides of the transport had been secured up, and Rueger could see the sunset and the passing terrain and the faces of the men clearly. He was reminded once again of the Spa. It had been such a happy time, right up until the others had understood something and gone on, and he had faltered. It occurred to Rueger that he was now being given a second chance.

Then there was the grinding of gears as the convoy slowed. Ahead, Rueger could see two buses and their escort turn off the highway and head down a side road that took them around the base of a hill and out of sight. There were curious bits and pieces of burnt or rusted things building up beside the road, as if their owners had been told at this point that such objects were forbidden where they were going. Except for the long, passing shadows of the convoy, the setting sun gave everything a mild, infrared quality. There wasn't a single, whole, standing building in sight, yet the air was close with the haze and oppressive smell that lingers in a factory district on a windless day. The landscape went by like pictures sent back from the surface of another world. Rueger had never been to Soweto, but he knew they were close. He glanced again at the soldiers beside him.

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At first he was sure they were blushing: their faces reddening, but not from anger or drink or from the sun. Then Rueger saw they were flushed with terrible excitement—the kinship of sudden, imminent victory. But the soldiers had not so much as left their seats. Then he realized that the Holy Spirit must be close at hand. God had come, and they were greeting Him. Rueger knew of nothing else it could be.

He watched all those familiar faces passing out of easy recognition, quickening, alive with the Power. He had known most of these men his entire adult life, and yet it occurred to Rueger just then that they might have been secretly bred in some heightened way, and that for just a moment, for his benefit, they were dropping their pretense of being ordinary.

It was as if the transport was suddenly filled with fierce, irresistible music that everyone but Rueger could hear. It made him very conscious of how little he really knew about the Almighty. Initially you wanted God because without Him you were set slightly apart in company. He was a credential you applied for with prayer. But that was all before you became a witness to the actual fact. Now a very different part of Rueger wanted the Holy Spirit. He watched the soldiers with their Lord. It was a sight more potent and isolating than even group anger toward him would have been. More than ever, Rueger felt what the man with a great thirst does when drinks are passed round, and he is slighted.

Then they were parked at a gate on a rise overlooking much of Soweto. In the last of the sunlight, the black workers were slowly leaving their buses and filing through the gate. Rueger stood by the personnel carrier taking in the view. The first hut inside the gate reminded him of the pirate's den he had built with his friends when they were small. Others nearby looked no better than the makeshift City Works canopies that allow sidewalk cement to dry during the rains. As he looked beyond, over the crate-wood slabs and corrugated sheets leaning and sagging on one another as far as his eye could see, Rueger thought of an American animated film called *The Three Little Pigs.*

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"I'll huff. And I'll puff. And I'll blow your house down," the Big Bad Wolf had said. If that wolf huffed and puffed from here, Rueger thought, he would flatten the place. The falling wouldn't stop until it reached the other side of Soweto. It was the most unpromising place to look for the Holy Spirit Rueger could imagine.

And he considered the aliens carefully too: their line moving closely through the gate and then separating slightly out into the clearing between the fence and the first row of shacks—not really seeming to head toward anything, just moving. Rueger was again struck by the great, lasting curiosity of them all. What aliens were not was so much clearer than what they were. With that otherness, that blank remoteness about them like an enclosure, they certainly were no temple of the Holy Spirit! And yet . . . and yet Rueger would admit they had a teasing pull, a riddle to them too—if you cared to look long enough. As usual the Elders had put their finger on it at the Spa: "The problem," an Elder had said to Rueger's group, "is their humanoid appearance."

"It would be more useful," a second Elder had gone on, "to think of them as we do the dolphin, for instance: simply not designed for what we are designed. There is no blame here; still, no amount of dolphin intelligence can change the fact that they are fish. What we do share with all is a common maker—God made *all* the colors. But to insist on anything beyond resemblance is a denial of the choices, the sacred distinctions, the Almighty has also made. We relocate the Bantu, the Zulu and so forth into Homelands for the same reason fish are consigned to the sea."

The more Rueger looked back and forth now between the aliens and the soldiers positioned around them, the more certain he was that salvation lay in the difference between them—it was the Quick against the Dead. Clearly, the less alien you were the more blessed, the more empowered, you became. But did demonstrating to God your allegiance to men draw forth His Grace? Was that the Way? Rueger couldn't bear the thought of God evading him any longer.

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Niels's platoon went up one lane and down another that night. No light and no sound came from the huts. No one could be seen moving inside them or out in the open. In many sections there were only the truck headlights and the searchlight mounted on the cab to see by. Along other stretches they switched everything off. The tires were quiet on the dirt roads, and no city noise could be heard from far off. Things came through the air toward the truck from time to time. Soundless things on fire. But they always came from places that were silent and empty, so they never seemed quite real—as if a memory were occurring before its event. Twice the truck stopped, and a black African moved from the shadows to talk quietly with the soldiers in front. It was so silent that Rueger began to hear the night as a low humming in his ears: as if in the presence of huge machinery that was running but disengaged. The heavy acrid factory smell still hung in the air—so even if you closed your eyes it was impossible to pretend you were in an inhabited place, a neighborhood. It was so dark and unrelieved that a group of black women standing on a corner in bright, store-bought dresses looked like a gaudy fan sprung open by mistake. Niels pulled up some distance from them and waited. They stood very still for the headlights, as if the truck were a camera that required a very long exposure. And Rueger, feeling his resolve, his keen sense of expectation slipping away, turned impatient.

"Is it always this dull?" he asked the men in the back.

"Most of them are at rallies," said one of the soldiers. "We have rounds to do first—but don't you worry."

Later the truck stopped again, facing what seemed to be the only trees in Soweto. Niels got out. He stood for awhile arms folded, looking up into the branches, considering. All three lights penetrated deeply into the trees, but Rueger could see nothing. Then Niels reached up as if he had decided on the piece of fruit he wanted. He pulled a small brown leg down into sight and a boy tumbled after. The men around Rueger started yanking down the canvas flaps along the sides of the personnel carrier as their small alien was handed inside. He sat on the floor with the soldiers' legs dangling down around him.

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He watched the stiff canvas that hung over the back open a little at the bottom when the truck reached a certain speed.

Then abruptly the truck pulled over and all the soldiers jumped down and fanned out quickly into the dark. Rueger found himself alone with an alien at his feet. The child lay on his side now, eyes open, one cheek flat on the floor as if listening to someone trying to speak to him from beneath the truck. Rueger hesitated, then he put his hand down on the boy's neck firmly enough to feel the racing pulse but not yet gripping.

"Move," he said softly to the alien, with the boy not moving, but his eyes opening a little wider. Rueger leaned down farther and whispered, "Go on now. Move."

Rueger had been thinking of scripture, of Genesis and dominion, God's gift to man back at the start: ". . . into your hand are they delivered." Rueger leaned down so close he could hear the quick, shallow breathing and see the tiny panting of the chest and the one staring eye. "Are you delivered unto me?" he asked so only the boy could possibly hear. "Move if you're not."

And when the child did not so much as blink, Rueger felt a new, welcome presence entering in—not just close by approving, but actively sharing, leaning down with him to the boy. It was that old feeling of another self reaching through him again, but much stronger now than at the Spa. This feeling grew until Rueger's own fingers looked to him like the fingers on a welcome stranger's hand tightening around the brown neck. He knew of only one stranger it could be.

As Rueger's grip tightened a bit more in his excitement, the child's head rolled back gently against his hand, eyes and mouth slightly ajar. Then somehow Rueger was outside himself seeing into the back of the transport at the splayed, flattened figure pinned down helplessly from above, and nothing seemed to be entering into it but his own dominion. He was slowly memorizing this picture when the men returned.

After rounds the truck pulled up to a large Quonset hut with a crowd pressing around the entrance. The light from inside was on their black faces. As the soldiers stepped down

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from the transport one of them swung the boy up onto his shoulders. Some of the crowd at the door turned their heads, and when the boy saw them looking his way he immediately started to life: kicking with his heel at the center of the soldier's chest—not to break free but to strike carefully at one certain place. Rueger had seen this sort of thing before in the Game Parks when a wild animal is let loose carelessly from a trap. But it was far more exciting to watch when one's own little alien was suddenly freed of the Holy Spirit.

The soldier struggled to pull him off, but the boy slipped down and grabbed around the man's neck, sinking his teeth into the side of the soldier's face along the jaw. He roared like a bull. His sunglasses flew to the side. The boy's legs dangled free, but he held on with his teeth and arms against the heavy blows now coming from all sides. Then his arms went back, and someone took hold of his throat and found the windpipe to press in until the boy let go. They flung him down, but this time there was nothing to keep him there. He was up at once. Like a scrap of paper taken by the wind he was through the men and out into the darkness between nearby huts.

Rueger stepped quickly past the pale, bent-over soldier and moved down the cleared lane into the building. There were a hundred or more black Africans sitting bunched together in the dim light and more standing along the walls. At the far end before a makeshift altar lit with candles a white priest stood waiting, his face and vestments drenched with sweat as if he had just been running. The air was hot and rank with an odd, pungent odor reminding Rueger of how the bottom of a pond smells while it is draining, and of other things unused to open air he couldn't quite picture. The soldiers took up positions around the room, two flanking the priest. Niels motioned impatiently to the clergyman to stop worrying. "No arrests, tonight," he said.

The priest began again. With everyone still now he could be heard quite clearly. But in Soweto much of everything the soldiers heard, and said, they seemed to overhear. When they overheard themselves speak, this built-in distancing came without effort, as an unforeseen, comforting sensation. They

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saw everything in Soweto clearly too, yet with the altered clarity that comes out of the reverse end of a telescope. Occasionally someone would ask that an order be repeated so that he might be sure of it, but there was no awkwardness since all the men did this at one time or another. Generally, each soldier there felt as if he were somehow at the center of a memory or that memories of the other men and the aliens were somehow going on around him. And it was so orderly and calm inside, everyone assumed it to be a state of Grace. While on patrol every soldier shared this feeling of being active inside a memory and enjoyed thinking of it as Grace.

So everything that happened to them in Soweto seemed optional. Yes, they were in it now, aware of it now, but it needn't happen to them until some other time.

This apartness lent itself to mild curiosity, to casual exploration. And Rueger, crowded in with the black Africans along the wall, took the face of an adult male next to him. He was certain it was dark enough to be pure alien. Except for a patch of pink by the temple where a scrape had started to heal, the skin had a deep brimming look that reminded him of blood pudding. He reached over and tapped his finger on the cheek, and it trembled just the way pudding with a skin would. A second tap, harder, to be sure. Up close, this skin looked to Rueger even more like a protective coating, a preservative the body had been dipped in, holding fast everywhere and doing odd things to the hair.

He had never been this close for this long to a male alien his size. This was far more exciting than the boy, even though the excitement made its presence known without quite affecting him, as in a memory not dwelt upon. Their nearness held him for a moment, and then Rueger remembered to be insulted by it too. He remembered to be angered by a close black skin with its implication of a space held in common, with what must look to others—to God—like acceptance on his part. But that should not be. He couldn't allow that. And suddenly Rueger found that all the pleasing remoteness of the night was now in his way.

He brought his anger into the present. He let excitement

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and anger happen to him directly. Rueger looked at the close black skin now and let the idea of an alien protective coating taunt him. And as the notion of an insult from an alien sank in, he felt the Power returning. Rueger wanted nothing more than to use it to gouge through the challenge of the black skin, to see it ruptured—so a little tapping with a fingertip would not do. He felt the Holy Spirit there inside him like a warrior angel.

Now he looked at the black cheek and had no trouble imagining a puncture wound: one clean, bloodless hole, like a surgical plug removed from the side of the face. Rueger held his alien very still. Then he imagined the cheek pulled wide apart to expose the secrets of an alien jaw, with its two ivory decks of teeth and then the bell curve of the cheekbone and the whole "humanoid appearance" that was there. And he tried to imagine the corridor through it all that a bullet would make. Or something larger. At once he was able to see it and then, unexpectedly, without effort, his imagination went beyond. As he kept the deep cavity of the wound open and clear, the tip of a long, solid iron bar seemed to come from nowhere, rising up to the opening in the black cheek and easing inside. The heavy bar continued to slide in and in until Rueger knew it had gone through and out the far side of the head. Then quickly, as this vision was breaking away, the long bar began to ascend, bearing the alien up by his head. Aloft, other aliens were now visible along the bar, toted by their heads like a traveling exhibit for a fair. Their torsos were all faced one way and gently bobbed from the gait of the bearers whom Rueger could not see. The row of heads was faced one way too, tilting back, eyelids and mouths slightly ajar in the manner of the alien boy. Dominion, thought Rueger quietly to himself, the wonder of it.

Then the close black face was there again, and the hot airless room filled with others came back, and now the distant voice of the priest. Rueger smiled. The alien still appeared to be listening intently to the priest but now Rueger knew better. This adult male, he knew, had no more freedom than some roadside animal in the night frozen by headlights.

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On his way to work Monday, Rueger enlisted. Ready now to come into his own.

Over time, most every soldier on patrol made direct contact with his God just as Rueger had. A mass revelation arrived at separately, in private, as one by one each felt singled out from above and made aware of his dominion. Clearly, it seemed to be God's way of beckoning to men. It gave the soldiers of the Home Guard energy to spare. For the bread and wine they took kneeling on Sunday was the fuel that they burned in Soweto.

III

One day on patrol Rueger is cut off from his squad. There has been much rioting and much shifting of position. His fellows could be anywhere, but that is fine: when you all move as an arm of God no one is apart. Up ahead out of sight there is now a sudden, deadening loss of sound, a terrible breach in the distant air, then a rippling concussive shock from the thing detonated, and a dark oily mass blows straight toward Rueger up the street. He watches it coming, ready, half expecting aliens to be inside. "Come on," he says to the cloud. The smoke arrives, envelopes him and passes cleanly away.

Rueger's immunity to fear never fails to please him. He has been assured it is a routine part of supremacy, but still. Sometimes he feels cheated that he hadn't known about it as a boy, back when he really could have used it. Those walks home from school through the subterranean quiet of his residential neighborhood (always aware something wasn't quite right, never sure what it could be). And yet now, here, on a fiery night in Soweto, knowing that nearly every street corner, yard, roof and cellar, every rotting heap of debris, was crawling with aliens, Rueger is more than ready to go explore.

Supremacy is so wonderful he tends to go through his day just savoring it. Rueger knows now that it has been with him all along: as that other self reaching through him, as the feverish

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power of the Holy Spirit, as this final, deep overflowing. They are all the same, all one in the way that wind is first a stirring. And at last he knows what to do; you must clear the way for something so precious. You must build a simple life around it. Without hesitation Rueger took his money out of the Diamond Exchange not long ago and bought a farm. No high finance, no office politics, no colleagues, just the working of the land with a small village of aliens under him. For a short time he even quit the Home Guard—he didn't need it—for, at first, the farm had everything.

Supremacy, the sheer feeling of it makes everything clear. It has buoyancy without effort and momentum without needing to get underway. It has well being. To Rueger it feels distilled in equal parts from his best rugby season, the early seductions of his women, the first rounds at the pub and the signing of deeds that extend his new farm. The fresh steady pleasure of it now simply overwhelms the worry from things that puzzle him. And supremacy says: all your good feelings are deserved.

Up ahead, there is something in the road. It is still giving off a little smoke, and Rueger has already come into its smell. A chemical spill of some sort or the part of a bad lorry accident not yet cleared away. It is mostly a low mound a foot or so by six feet, blackened and congealed looking: something formed by melting down. Rueger is close enough now to see the leg sticking out from it, with some other limb folded under. The smell is so strong his lungs won't accept it, so he holds his breath and stares. It's a dead body all right, but there are no flies, birds or small animals interested in it. This body is too encased for that. It looks like an unfinished modern sculpture of a man on his back, with only the one leg completed. Rueger can make out the dome of the head now and the hollow where the melting rubber has flowed into the mouth.

Rueger has never seen a death by "necklacing" before, but he agrees it is clearly a thing only one alien could do to another. He observes it as he would some terrible virus or toxin on view in a laboratory: seeing just enough to know that it mustn't have anything to do with him.

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Rueger still can't store a lot in his mind about the Chosen People, all the details, but now he is very good at holding on to the feeling supremacy gives him. He burns steady and bright with it, like a hurricane lamp whose heavy glass panes are sealed especially tight. At the Spa his unreflective spirit, that lack of mental discipline, frustrated the historians and social planners, but the Elders defended him saying that perhaps Rueger's calling will someday lie not in understanding but in rapture. To most the Elders taught awareness, control, appreciation and implementation, but to many they finally said, simply, "enjoy." It has taken Rueger until now to accept this. He is determined to make up for lost time.

There are those among his family and friends who are still a little disturbed by the instinctual approach—Rueger's grandparents in particular feel they should disapprove. But he is so carefree now that not one has the heart to scold him. And something about this Rueger makes the scholars, the codifiers and the administrators of supremacy secretly feel their own work has diluting properties. In fact those most sobered by their Lord's mandate are glad for such a Rueger. He starts something up inside all of them: the sort of quickening you do to slip through the revolving door that someone up ahead really got started: no time to think—just go! They use Rueger's face for all the Home Guard recruiting posters.

He circles the body before letting his breath go. On the far side he can see both legs clearly, the second folded under the first at an improbable angle. But no arms, really; it is like a hooded straitjacket of tar. Good Lord, Rueger thinks, what a job we would have if they all had to go that way. He hears soft-bullet gunfire coming from well off to his right, then more quiet.

Way up Rueger's street, too far for a credible shot, a group of ragged black men and boys suddenly race across to a gap between the shanty huts. A trailing runner stops to work loose one edge of a wooden barricade. Heading after the others he tests its heft for throwing as he runs. The man wears a gauzy sagging blue top, canvas shorts and a red wool stocking cap

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suitable for a northern winter (alien metabolism, Rueger has been told).

Patrolling on foot alone is rare now, but Rueger likes it. The water cannon on a hot day is exciting in a theatrical way, and group shooting from fenced-in perches mounted on the lorries promotes team spirit, but firing from a moving vehicle is strictly outlawed in the game parks, and Rueger feels funny about it here. Supremacy, after all, isn't a matter of weapons or of invincibility really, because even if they can kill you, you are still superior. Besides, when he thinks about packs of aliens like the running one just now, Rueger has to laugh. His platoon commander Niels calls the Soweto resistance effort the "Alien Olympics." To Rueger that's just what it looks like: low-budget track and field.

He is in a remote, unfamiliar area now, and the low African sun burns at him and washes him in red whenever a lane opens up to the west. Rueger thinks about this time of day before all his patrolling started: back then at this hour he would be walking home across his new land. From the fields Rueger's house lay to the east, so his shadow was huge before him along that walk. He would remember the Elder saying, "At sunset it is not the angle of the sun so much as the shadow of your true self." What this meant exactly was never quite clear to Rueger, but he liked the emotion that went with repeating it as he walked.

But those early times as a landowner had ended almost as soon as they had begun, and he is walking in Soweto now because the farm and such moments have been spoiled for him. Up until the spoiling, he had been reluctant to go on patrol, but a single discovery one afternoon changed all that.

During his first month on the farm he had been digging an irrigation ditch on a far corner of his land. Two migrant workers were sorting out tools in the back of his lorry. Rueger wasn't waiting for their help. It was the sort of work he loved: the spade head passing through veldt grass into the dry sandy top soil; then up, overcoming the resistance of the weight with his back and arms. Back down went the spade through the shadow from the mouth of the hole toward the deeper soil and up with

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that, rich and heavy, into the light. Rueger looked at it and stopped. The contents of the spade head held him there for a long moment. Here was a shovelful of earth like any other but he was seeing the color of his bottom soil as if for the first time. To Rueger it was suddenly the exact same dark brown—almost black—of alien skin. He looked over toward the lorry as the two men were climbing down. It was a match. Fascinated, confronted by a sudden terrible evil, Rueger stood holding the shovel and its load. When he looked back over to his approaching aliens something on his face stopped both men. They had seen the look before. Without hesitating, they put down their tools and began to step back, keeping their eyes on Rueger until they could turn and hurry away. Rueger paid no attention to them. Quickly he moved to a new spot and dug down again. The color was there, as before.

Later, Rueger stood looking out over the reach of land that was his farm (with his nation beyond that) seeing it all—his house, crops, even himself—as standing on alien ground. Everywhere, just below the surface, it was waiting like some elemental contamination. Then exhausted, sickened, Rueger let this vision go—he had to. But he wasn't really his old self again until the new foreman was in place, and he was on patrol.

Now it is dark, and Rueger has a stone in his boot. The stone has been in there for a while, but this area is no place to stop. He prefers the heavy, high-top, lace-up combat boots, but they are no good for foot pursuit, and it is important to be in on the chase. On patrol he wears South African-made "jogging boots": cushioned heel, reinforced arch with lateral support, lightweight metal toe and dyed the basic colors of an alien township. In the distance Rueger can see the section garage for commuter buses; the unburnt part that is still standing is the largest structure in western Soweto, and Rueger limps toward it.

It is cool and still inside and completely dark, so Rueger puts his rifle up against what he takes to be a wall, settles himself down leisurely on what feels like packed earth and blindly attends to his foot. He rubs the place where the stone

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has been and rests his patrol-eager eyes, wondering vaguely about where to go next.

Quickly into the silence outside comes the sound of runners, ten or more working close together as if training for distance. But the sound of their breathing is not from the slender fluted breaths of marathoners going lightly by; theirs is the deep, hoarse, agonized work of lungs. And yet despite such distress and pain, they all go by as fast as any foot race. Rueger waits for boot sounds or tire sounds but, curiously, nothing follows. He curses the stone that has prevented his own pursuit and lets the aliens go. Then, slowly, it becomes clear that the complete silence before the runners has not returned, and Rueger is aware of another sound, this one inside the room with him.

He hears it first as moaning, as a low, male voice suffering, one of his own kind in trouble: perhaps a wounded soldier who has crawled inside to die. But then the voice changes in a way that makes him take hold of his rifle: an eerie rising up some unknown musical scale that, for Rueger, leaves its human quality behind in the manner of an alien lullaby. Then this strange crooning drops down into a deep guttural rumbling sound, a terrible purring that reaches him through the dark mainly as vibration. Rueger's eyes aren't getting used to the room so he tries to hurry them along. Abruptly, the voice returns to its initial moaning that now strikes Rueger as a clever, mocking imitation of a fellow in distress. And yet as this goes on its human quality so reaffirms itself that Rueger is again convinced he has come across a friend out of his head with pain.

He waits. The voice cycle repeats itself, and again he feels placed in first human, then alien, then animal, company. Rueger is certain that somehow he is being challenged.

"You there!" he shouts. "*You*. Identify yourself."

The voice continues uninterrupted, unchanged, as if quite peacefully apart. A white man would have answered me, Rueger thinks.

"All right my deaf Bantu friend," Rueger says. "Break out your papers."

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No change from across the room.

"You know the penalty!" Rueger starts to get up to turn on the light before he remembers where they are. There is nothing directly threatening in these sounds from across the room; it is their separate contentment that bothers him; it is the easy, untouched solitude of the voice—and its complete unresponsiveness to him—that presses up against Rueger and unnerves him. He strains forward anxiously in the dark half-seeing a silhouette now, almost a molded form, but, so far, one without trace or hint of color or the sign of a skin to cover it. Rueger continues to strain until he sees less than before.

It is time to get up. But Rueger finds himself too heavy and powerless to stir. He feels held in place somehow by the oblivious calm of the other. He can't remember one Spa exercise or a line from a single sermon. But he remembers the recruiting posters. Rueger thinks of his shining, shining face in all those lighted showcases, on all those walls and posts and telephone poles and finds he now has use of his hands.

"You!" Rueger calls out. "You *listen* to this." He draws back the bolt which brings a cartridge up from the magazine and places it into the firing chamber. "You're square in my sights now," he says. But this is a lie, for part of Rueger is still insisting he just might be with one of his own kind. He must be sure—how would he explain shooting a white soldier too out of his head to know the passwords?

A soft, deadly sort of cooing is all that Rueger can hear now, a long deep powerful exhalation that hastens his sense of things falling away and hollowing out inside him. Fear comes pouring into the hollow but for an instant Rueger feels sure it is more of the burning liquid rubber he saw flowing into the alien's mouth.

Rueger calls silently to his god for help: if he can *see* what he is facing, he can act! But now as the silhouette finally does move and detach itself, the darkness is not altered, and Rueger watches someone rise up forward toward him as a figure of indeterminate color.

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The Bible

Umberto Eco

I must say that the first few hundred pages of this manuscript really hooked me. Action packed, they have everything today's reader wants in a good story. Sex (lots of it, including adultery, sodomy, incest), also murder, war, massacres, and so on.

The Sodom and Gomorrah chapter, with the transvestites putting the make on the angels, is worthy of Rabelais; the Noah stories are pure Jules Verne; the escape from Egypt cries out to be turned into a major motion picture . . . In other words, a real blockbuster, very well structured, with plenty of twists, full of invention, with just the right amount of piety, and never lapsing into tragedy.

But as I kept on reading, I realized that this is actually an anthology, involving several writers, with many—too many—stretches of poetry, and passages that are downright mawkish and boring, and jeremiads that make no sense.

The end result is a monster omnibus. It seems to have something for everybody, but ends up appealing to nobody. And acquiring the rights from all these different authors will mean big headaches, unless the editor take cares of that himself. The editor's name, by the way, doesn't appear anywhere on the manuscript, not even in the table of contents. Is there some reason for keeping his identity a secret?

I'd suggest trying to get the rights only to the first five chapters. We're on sure ground there. Also, come up with a better title. How about *The Red Sea Desperadoes*?

—translated from the Italian
by William Weaver

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

FICTION

Charles D'Ambrosio's work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Story* and the anthology *I Know Some Things*, edited by Lorrie Moore. He is a James Michener Fellow and lives in Hoquiam, Washington.

Umberto Eco, a professor of semiotics at the University of Bologna, is the author of the novels *The Name of the Rose* and *Foucault's Pendulum*. "The Bible" is taken from his essay collection, *Misreadings*, which will be published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich this summer. His translator, **William Weaver**, lives in Italy and is the arts correspondent for the *Financial Times* (London). He has translated the work of many Italian authors, among them Italo Calvino and Elsa Morante.

Kenneth Koch's recent books include his *Selected Poems* and *One Thousand Avant-Garde Plays*. The piece in this issue will be included in his story collection *Hotel Lambosa*, forthcoming from Coffee House Press.

Josip Novakovich emigrated from Croatia to the United States sixteen years ago. His story "Rust" (*Paris Review* #113) was reprinted in *The Pushcart Prize* anthology. His work has also appeared in *New Directions*, *Antaeus*, *Boulevard* and numerous other journals. He has held fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Ingram Merrill Foundation and received many awards.

Joy Williams's first novel, *State of Grace*, was published by Paris Review Editions in 1974. This year she received the Strauss Living Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She lives in Key West.

Thomas Wilson's stories have appeared in *Antaeus*, *American Fiction* and other journals. Since 1980 he has lived in Rhode Island, where he has charge

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of the oldest library building in the United States, the Redwood Library and Atheneum, which was built in 1747.

POETRY

George Bradley's second book of poetry is *Of the Knowledge of Good and Evil*. The American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters recently awarded him its Witter Bynner Prize. He lives in Connecticut.

Henri Cole's poems in this issue come from a new collection, *The Look of Things*, forthcoming from Knopf. He is poet-in-residence at Reed College in Oregon.

James Cummins is the author of *The Whole Truth*, a poetry collection. He has received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Ohio Arts Council and the Ingram Merrill Foundation. He curates the Elliston Poetry Collection at the University of Cincinnati, where he is an associate professor of English.

Jeffery Donaldson teaches modern poetry at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. His first book of poetry, *Once Out of Nature*, was published in Canada in 1991.

Irving Feldman was named a MacArthur Fellow in 1992 and teaches in the English Department at SUNY Buffalo. His most recent collection is *All of Us Here*.

Albert Goldbarth's collection of poems, *Heaven and Earth*, was awarded the 1992 National Book Critics Circle Award. His most recent collection is *The Gods* (Ohio State University Press). He is Distinguished Professor of Humanities at Wichita State University.

Karl Kirchwey's first book of poems, *A Wandering Island*, received the Norma Farber First Book Award from the Poetry Society of America. His poetry has appeared in *The Yale Review*, *The Nation* and *The New Republic*. He is the director of the Unterberg Poetry Center of the 92nd Street YM-YWHA in New York City.

William Olsen's first poetry collection, *The Hand of God and a Few Bright Flowers*, was a National Poetry Series selection and won the Texas Institute of Arts Poetry Award. His poetry has appeared recently in *The Gettysburg Review* and *North American Review*. He teaches in the M.F.A. program at Western Michigan University.

Siri von Reis was born in 1931 and lives in New York City. She holds an M.F.A. in creative writing from Columbia University and a Ph.D. in biology from Harvard University. She is co-author of a scientific work, *Ethnobotany Today*. Her poems have appeared in *Columbia* and other literary magazines.

James Richardson teaches at Princeton University. His most recent collection of poetry is *As If*.

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Michael J. Rosen's poetry has appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *Southwest Review* and *Epoch*. He lives in Columbus, Ohio, where he is literary director of the Thurber House.

Tony Sanders's poems have appeared in *The New Republic*, *Grand Street*, *The Gettysburg Review* and *The Ohio Review*. "The Warning Track," which appears in this issue, won *The Paris Review*'s Bernard F. Conners Poetry Prize for 1992.

Charlie Smith's books include the poetry collections *Indistinguishable from the Darkness*, *Red Roads* and *The Palms* (forthcoming from Norton), the novels *Shine Hawk* (Paris Review Editions, 1988), *Canaan, The Lives of the Dead* and *Chimney Rock* (forthcoming from Henry Holt) and a novella collection, *Crystal River*. "Crystal River" won *The Paris Review*'s Aga Khan Prize in 1983.

Frederick Tibbetts lives in Princeton, New Jersey. His poems have appeared in *The Yale Review*, *Raritan* and *Ploughshares*.

William Wadsworth's poems have appeared in *The Yale Review*, *The New Republic* and *Grand Street*. He is the executive director of The Academy of American Poets.

Roger Weingarten teaches in and directs the graduate writing program at Vermont College. His books of poetry include *Infant Bonds of Joy*, *Shadow Shadow* and *Jungle Gliders*, which is forthcoming from Godine. He was co-editor of *New American Poets of the Nineties*.

Marc Woodworth is an assistant editor at *Salamagundi*. He teaches English at Skidmore College.

Stephen Yenser is a Professor of English at UCLA. The recipient of an Ingram Merrill Foundation grant and two Fulbright Foundation grants, he is the author of *The Fire in All Things* (forthcoming from LSU Press), which received the Walt Whitman Award from the Academy of American Poets.

Cynthia Zarin is the author of two collections of poetry, *The Swordfish Tooth* (1989) and *Fire Lyric and Other Poems* (forthcoming from Knopf).

INTERVIEWS

Robert E. Hosmer, Jr. (Amy Clampitt interview) is a professor of English at Smith College and is the editor of the essay collection *Contemporary British Women Writers: Texts and Strategies*. His essays and reviews have been published in *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Boston Globe* and *The Southern Review*.

James Linville (Mark Helprin interview) is the managing editor of *The Paris Review*.

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FEATURE

Shusha Guppy (Sybille Bedford interview) is the London editor of *The Paris Review*. *Looking Back*, a collection of her interviews, was published by Paris Review Editions in 1991.

ART

Gary Curtis was born in 1947 and lives in Seattle. His drawings are shown at the Davidson Galleries, Seattle.

Adam Fuss was born in London in 1961 and lives in New York. His unique photograms have been exhibited at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York and Robert Miller Gallery, New York.

Rainer Gross was born in Cologne in 1951 and lives in New York. His work has been exhibited at Ruth Siegel Gallery, New York; Galerie Inge Beacker, Cologne; and the Kunstverein Salzburg, Austria.

Sarah Plimpton, a poet, painter and printmaker, lives in New York. Her works are in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Metropolitan Museum and the New York Public Library.

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NOTICE

Word has been received of the death of William Pène du Bois in Nice, France, last January. He was 76. A founding editor of *The Paris Review*, he was the first art editor, responsible for the lively covers (he illustrated the first five), the use of illustrations for the fiction, and the publishing of art portfolios in each issue—very much anomalies given the rather grim law-review format of the literary magazines of the time. His frontispiece of the Place de la Concorde from an aerial perspective high above the Left Bank has graced these pages since the first issue in the spring of 1953. He designed *The Paris Review* logo—an American eagle perched on a pen and wearing a Phrygian hat of the type worn by Revolutionists of the nineteenth century. It occupied the top left hand corner of the cover for many issues. A meticulous craftsman (he was a foremost illustrator and writer of children's books), perhaps his most distinctive contributions were his wise counsel in the early days, his constant good humor, his level-headedness in times of editorial rancor and confusion.

For those of us who knew him, he will be remembered best for the pleasure of his company.

—G.A.P.

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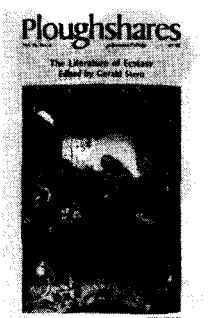

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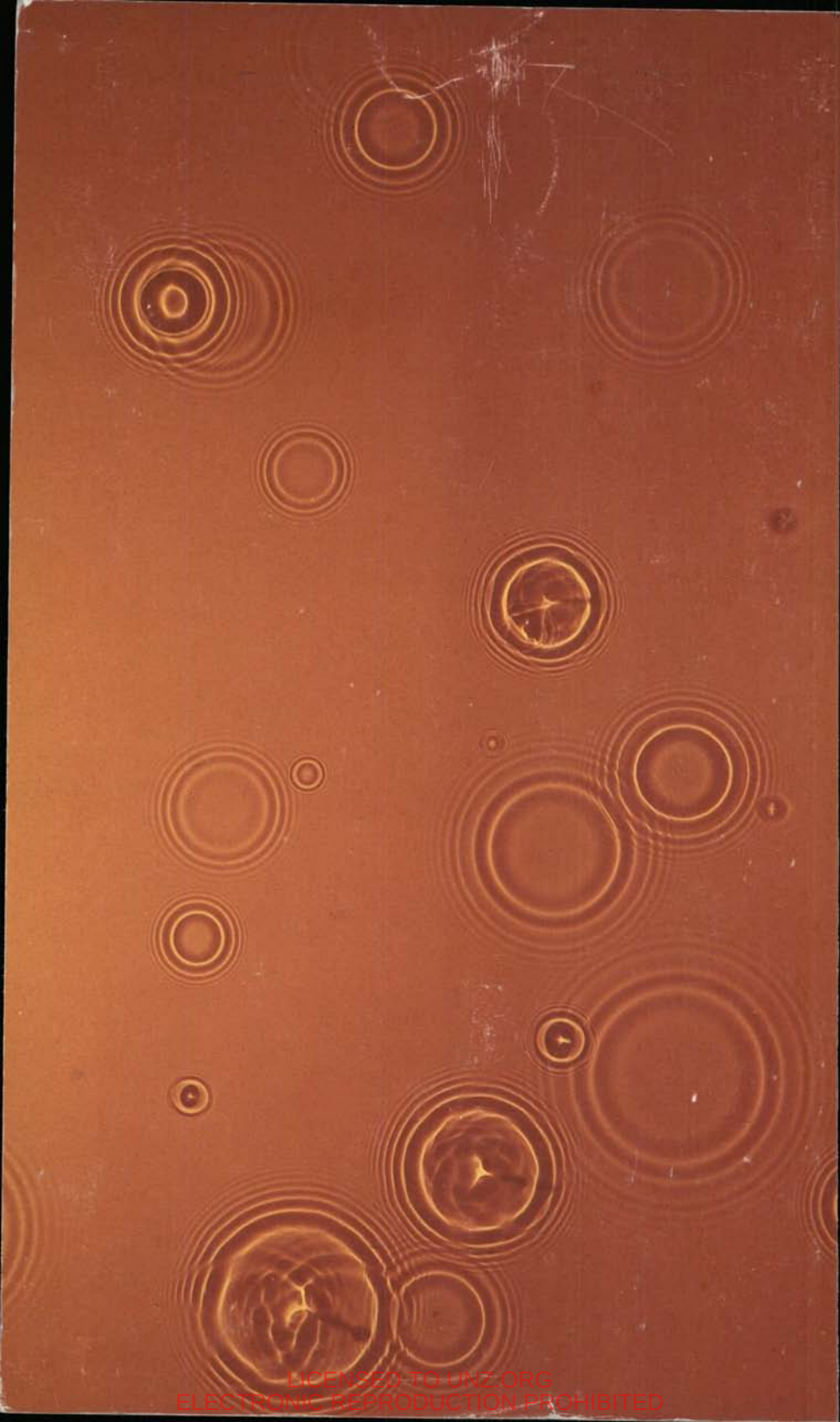
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